Author:
Cox, Owen

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The Problem with Antigone

Martyrdom, Resistance and Revolution in Slavoj Žižek's Antigone

The Problem with Antigone: Martyrdom, Resistance and Revolution in Slavoj Žižek's *Antigone*

by Owen Cox

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a reading of Slavoj Žižek's recent play *Antigone,* first published in November 2016. Žižek brings many ideas from his philosophical works into *Antigone*, attempting, in his own words, to make Antigone "part of the problem". This is at odds with a number of recent readings of Sophocles' play, including those of Tina Chanter and Judith Butler, that interpret Antigone as a heroic figure, an emblem for emancipatory and progressive struggle. Žižek's play is strange in that it concludes three times. In the first ending events follow the course of Sophocles' *Antigone*. In the second, Creon forgives Antigone and helps her to bury her brother; soon afterwards the Theban people burn the whole city to the ground. In the final ending the Chorus stages a revolutionary uprising, portrayed as an authentic "political Act" in distinction to Antigone's problematic actions.

In the first part of this dissertation I provide the backdrop for reading Žižek's *Antigone.* I begin discussing the readings of Chanter and Butler, pointing out some of the flaws with their views of the central character. I introduce ideas from Jacques Lacan, both his theory and his writings about Antigone, which inform much of Žižek's thought and his reception of the play. I then discuss Žižek's own previous readings of Sophocles' *Antigone* and how they relate to radical political action, specifically his concept of "the Act".

In the second part of this dissertation I turn to the text of Žižek's *Antigone.* I explore his characterisation of Antigone and how she is portrayed as a problematic heroine with reference to his theoretical works, particularly *The Sublime Object of Ideology.* I then discuss the play's endings, how the Chorus becomes for Žižek the authentic revolutionary agent, and how the play itself inspires us to think and to Act.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to anybody who has been part of my journey the past four and a half years at Bristol University. Besides that, special thanks to Sam Lister for grinding out the summer in the library besides me and for sharing my agony over many passages of Žižek and Lacan. Special thanks to Genevieve Liveley too for reading everything, for provoking (and reining in) my imagination, and for inspiring in me an interest in the way stories are told.

Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

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Contents

Only the martyrs know neither pity nor fear. Believe me, the day when the martyrs are victorious will be the day of universal conflagration.

Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*[1]

Yes, you sacrificed everything, but you did not sacrifice
your sacrifice itself. You gave away everything,
but you did not give away your act of giving itself.
It's only when you do that, when you not only disappear,
but when your very act of disappearing disappears,
that you are no longer in love with yourself,
with your noble gesture, and reach true modesty.

Slavoj Žižek, *Antigone*[2]

[1] Lacan, Jacques. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960.* Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller; Translated with Notes by Dennis Porter. London: Routledge, 2008. p.329
[2] Žižek, Slavoj. *Antigone.* Bloomsbury: London, 2016. p.12

Introduction

In recent times thinkers interested in emancipatory and progressive politics have adopted Antigone as an emblematic heroine for their struggles. For such thinkers, she stands for rights of the downtrodden, the oppressed, the excluded, attracting praise for her resistance to the oppressive patriarchal law, embodied in the figure of Creon, which denies her brother Polyneices the right to a decent burial.[3] Judith Butler and Tina Chanter are amongst the critics that read Antigone as a force for good, a heroic figure who shines forth as an emblem of progressive politics and emancipatory struggle. Butler argues that Antigone stands for the deconstruction of rigidly defined kinship positions. As such she stands as a figurehead for a movement that aims to liberate individuals from the limited pool of social roles available to them in traditionally organized cultures.[4] Chanter argues that Antigone heroically sacrifices herself to preserve the incest taboo, simultaneously atoning for her father Oedipus' crimes and proving that women are capable of meaningful action beyond the sphere of motherhood.[5] In both of these readings, Antigone is held up as a heroine representing a

[3] For works that draw on Antigone as a progressive heroine, see eg. Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. New York; Chichester, Columbia University Press, 2000; Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman,* trans: G. C. Gill. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1985, "The Universal as Mediation", in *Sexes and Genealogies,* trans: G. C. Gill. New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, "The Female Gender", in *Sexes and Genealogies,* trans: G. C. Gill. New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, "Between Myth and History: The Tragedy of Antigone" In: Wilmer, S. E, Zukauskaite, Audrone, et al. *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010. For discussions of adaptations of the play that characterize Antigone as a progressive, emancipatory heroine, see eg. Kofman, Sarah. "L'espace de la cesure", *Critique* 379 (1978): pp.1143-1150; Fugard, Athol. "*Antigone* in Africa", in: Mcdonald, M. and Walton, J.M. *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy.* London: Methuen, 2002. For well renowned adaptations of *Antigone* that explore contemporary political issues, see for example Heaney, Seamus. *The Burial at Thebes: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Girroux; London: Faber and Faber. 2004; Anouilh, Jean. *Antigone: A Tragedy by Jean Anouilh.* Trans. L. Galantiere. London, Methuen, 1951. Some critics disagree with the view that Antigone should be held up as the play's heroine. James Hogan argues that the play works better when both Creon and Antigone are presented as sympathetic characters. Hogan, James. "The Protagonists of the "Antigone"". *Arethusa*, Spring 1972, Vol.5(1), pp.93-100. W.M. Calder III argues that Creon is the tragic protagonist of Sophocles' *Antigone.* Calder III, W.M. "The Protagonist of Sophocles' Antigone," Arethusa 4.1 49 (1971) [cf. A. D. Fitton Brown, "A Reply," Arethusa 4 (1971) 52-54]. Christine Sourvinou-Inwood suggests that Antigone's cause is right, but her rebelliousness and her family history make her a repellent character, especially for a classical Athenian audience. Sourvinou-Inwood, Christine. "Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles' Antigone," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109 (1989) pp.134-48.

[4] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. New York, Chichester, Columbia University Press, 2000.

[5] Chanter, Tina. Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning. In: Wilmer, S. E, Zukauskaite, Audrone, et al. *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010. Elsewhere Chanter has explored the undertones of slavery that exist within the Oedipal cycle and *Antigone.* Chanter, T. *Whose Antigone? The tragic marginalization of slavery*. Albany: State University of New York Press 2011

progressive cause, defending the rights of women, the excluded, or the very social fabric of human civilisation.

In Slavoj Žižek's 2016 play *Antigone* the eponymous heroine is cast in a rather different light. Žižek makes it clear that his endeavour is to make Antigone into a troubling character, "part of the problem, not part of the solution".[6] This is in part a reaction to the recent tradition of reading Antigone as a progressive heroine, but also an endeavour to add a new level of political depth to the play.[7] Žižek's *Antigone* concludes three times, each ending following a different outcome of Antigone's clash with Creon. In the first ending, the events follow the course of Sophocles' *Antigone*: Antigone is hanged, Haemon commits suicide, and Creon is left in utter despair. In the second ending, Creon breaks his own law and assists Antigone in burying Polyneices. Angered by the King's actions the general populace of Thebes burn the entire city to the ground; fiery destruction looms large over all. In the third ending the Chorus becomes a radical political agent, rising up and establishing a democratic political system before the conflict of Antigone and Creon escalates into violence. In this ending the Chorus becomes an authentic revolutionary agent, in contrast to the "problematic", rebellious Antigone. Yet, as shall be seen, this conclusion to events is not without its own flaws.

The first chapter of this thesis will consider the analyses of Butler and Chanter in more depth, highlighting some of the issues with scholarly attempts to cast Antigone as an emblem of heroic political resistance. This will lay the groundwork for the subsequent analysis of Žižek's critical incision into the reception of Antigone, and make it clear that Antigone is far from being an ideal heroic figure. In the second chapter, we will introduce ideas from Jacques Lacan's reading of Sophocles'

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[6] Žižek, S. *Antigone* pp.xxiv-xxv. In her recent piece *Antigone after Auschwitz* (2015) Debra Bergoffen finds problems with the character of Antigone in Sophocles' play. She notes that Tiresias convinces Creon to bury Polyneices on the grounds that a person's humanity must be respected in death. Antigone, on the other hand, insists on burying him purely out of personal love, herself admitting that she would not have acted in this way for any others. For Bergoffen Antigone's *exclusive* love is thus the fundamentally problematic element of the play, and remains so in the 20th and 21st centuries where in her view we have still not overcome the political dichotomy between included neighbour and excluded other. See Bergoffen, Debra. "Antigone after Auschwitz" *Philosophy and Literature*, 2015 Sept, Vol.39(1A), pp.A249-A259

[7] In *Fascism On Stage: Jean Anouilh's Antigone* Katie Fleming reflects on the monumental status that *Antigone* and Antigone have taken in European consciousness. "Antigone," she claims, "has transcended the restrictions of any particular incarnation and become truly, if not simply, iconic." There is no one fixed way to interpret the play and the character: Antigone is, or has been, a fascist and a revolutionary, a proto-feminist and an anti-humanist. From the perspective of reception studies *Antigone* is a perfect example of how texts and characters can take on lives of their own, far removed from the worlds in which they were first dreamt into being. Fleming, Katie. "Fascism On Stage: Jean Anouilh's Antigone". In: Zajko, V. and Leonard, M. *Laughing with Medusa.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006. See Owen, Hilary and Alonso, Claudia Pazos. *Antigone's Daughters? Gender, Genealogy, and the Politics of Authorship in 20th Century Portuguese Women's Writing*. Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press 2011 for an example of how Antigone becomes a metaphor for exploring female authorship in Portuguese literature.

Antigone and Žižek's own previous writings about the Sophoclean play, painting the backdrop for Žižek's reworking of the ancient narrative in the 2016 *Antigone.* In the third and fourth chapters we will consider elements of Žižek's play itself, first honing in on the characterization of Antigone, then focusing on the uprising of the Chorus, the play's unusual structure and its narrative effect(s). This shall lead to a conclusion in which we shall consider how the play stands as a play about radical political struggle. We shall see that although Žižek's play dethrones Antigone and dramatizes the flaws inherent in challenging the establishment, *Antigone* is still at its core a call for revolutionary minded individuals to act.

1. Responses to reading Antigone as a heroine

Tina Chanter's *Antigone's Political Legacies*

In her essay *Antigone's Political Legacies*, Tina Chanter argues that Antigone restores Theban civic order through her actions, undoing the chaos introduced into the polis by her father Oedipus.[8] Chanter's endeavour is to rescue Antigone from the status of an irrational monstrosity, which she claims is how many contemporary readers interpret her, particularly those from the male dominated Lacanian camp. Chanter argues that this is a function of the masculine, phallocentric logic of psychoanalysis and of its commentators, suggesting that these men tend to instinctively read Antigone as an illogical monster and ignore Antigone's own rational justifications for her actions.[9] Against this, Chanter argues that Antigone does in fact offer a rational explanation for her actions.

Chanter begins her own argument by building off a point made by Mary Beth Mader in *Antigone's Line*. According to Mader, although the Chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone* claims that Antigone repeats the error of Oedipus, this error is in fact precisely what she avoids.[10] By insisting on the irreplaceability of Polyneices as her brother, she is "symbolically refusing a family precedent, namely that of *generating one's own sibling*".[11] Mader recognizes that this would technically be impossible for Antigone, since her parents, Oedipus and Jocasta, are already both dead. Nonetheless, Antigone's action is grounded less in actual possibility than in "the moral law that she must not, should not – even if it were possible – generate a child that would also be her brother."[12] Essentially, in Mader's reading, Antigone is concerned with re-establishing this "moral law" that places a prohibition on generating children through incest.

The question remains why it is necessary for Antigone to die, when she could (theoretically at least) continue to live a life without birthing children, thus ending the incestuous Oedipal line. Chanter argues that the cultural climate of Greek society impels Antigone towards motherhood:

> Had Antigone as a woman been able to look forward to a future other than that of reproducing children, had she been granted the potential to contribute productively to the

[8] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning*. p.38
[9] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning*. p.29-35
[10] See Sophocles *Antigone* lines 471-2. Robert Fagles translates the line "Like father like daughter, passionate, wild … | she hasn't learned to bend before adversity" (lines 525-7 in Fagles' version). Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Trans: Robert Fagles. New York, Penguin, 1984.
[11] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning.* p.38. Chanter refers to Mader, Mary Beth. Antigone's Line. *Bulletin de la Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française.* Volume 14, Number 2, Fall 2005 p.14
[12] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning*. p.38

> polis in some other way – as a political figure, for example, her death might not have been necessary.[13]

Given the social climate and cultural context in which the Sophoclean drama is set, Antigone's only possible future is that of motherhood. Faced with the prospect of continuing an incestuous family line or death, she chooses death "in order to protect a binding principle of her community", the incest principle.[14] According to Chanter, Antigone's stubborn insistence on burying Polyneices, an act she knows will be punished by death, is in fact an ethical and political act. Her sacrifice brings an end to the chaos introduced into Theban society when Jocasta gave birth to children that were at once the sons and daughters and the brothers and sisters of Oedipus.[15]

Chanter also suggests that Antigone's actions force us to recognize that women are capable of political action, and further, wisdom. Antigone defies the patriarchal authority of Creon as well as the life of subservient motherhood prescribed to her by Greek culture. She reclaims her agency, and becomes an emblem of resistance, representing the possibility of a different future for any oppressed class.[16] Furthermore Chanter claims that:

> In and through her deeds, in and through her refusal to back away from her deeds, Antigone proves herself in death to have had the potential to be a more effective political leader than Creon could ever be. She herself is denied the right to become such a leader because the political status quo, represented by Creon in *Antigone,* ridicules the idea that women might be effective political leaders. Yet she bequeaths that potential not only to future women but to future war protestors, future protestors of apartheid, future protestors of attacks on gay identity – and so on.[17]

In Chanter's view, Antigone represents not only political opposition but progressive struggle in general. Chanter sees Antigone as a positive figure of resistance: she sacrifices herself to reassert the incest principle, a "binding principle of her community", and at the same time sends the message to the future that power can be challenged and that women can act effectively in the political sphere.

Chanter's approach finds in Antigone a martyr, resisting the tyrannical Creon and the constrictive social institutions of Theban society. Yet such a reading is flawed on multiple counts. Referring to the first part of Chanter's argument (the idea that Antigone's self-sacrifice reasserts the incest principle),

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[13] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning*. p.43
[14] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning*. p.46
[15] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning*. p.43
[16] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning*. p.45
[17] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning*. p.45

one need simply note that if the heroine's motivation is to exorcise the incestuous tumour that her family represents in Thebes before it multiplies and pollutes any further, it is strange that she actively encourages Ismene to continue living.[18] As Chanter herself states, the limited social roles available to Theban women make it highly likely that Ismene will at some point become a mother, thus perpetuating the incestuous family line. This inconvenient fact throws a spanner into the works of Chanter's argument. If we wish to continue entertaining the hypothesis regarding why Antigone feels she must die, we must modify it slightly. It would appear that it is not the fact that Oedipus' corrupted line will continue that frightens Antigone; it is the fact that *she herself* may continue it. Thus, she is not so much concerned with restoring social order by reasserting the incest prohibition as she is in simply removing her own personal risk of perpetuating of the crime. Her motivation is primarily personal and not political/social.[19] In addition to this, Antigone seems to have an egoistic attachment to her act and death, stubbornly refusing to let Ismene share in it:

> Who did the work?
> Let the dead and the god of death bear witness!
> I have no love for a friend who loves in words alone.[20]

A few lines later, she utters a similar sentiment:

> Never share my dying,
> don't lay claim to what you never touched.
> My death will be enough.[21]

These quotations make it clear that Antigone is set on protecting the purity of her martyrdom; as Ismene did not help with the burial of Polyneices, she does not deserve to share in the punishment (or praise) that attached to it. This egoistic attachment in turn causes problems for the rest of Chanter's reading, which focuses on Antigone as a politically motivated actor. Antigone cares for her personal status as the authentic transgressor of Creon's law. Furthermore, she harshly discourages

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[18] Sophocles *Antigone* lines 538-560. (605-631 in Robert Fagles' translation.) At 615 in Fagles Antigone says to Ismene "Never share my dying, | don't lay claim to what you never touched. | My death will be enough". At 630 she says "Courage! Live your life. I gave myself to death, | long ago, so I might serve the dead". Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*.

[19] Another ethical issue with this line in Chanter's argument is the question of inherited guilt. "Antigone's…rejection of her father's incest, her intent to stand by her decision to bury its legacy with Polynices, is… a call for a new political order, not an anarchist or terrorist or monstrous celebration. She transforms her abject, victim status, as one haunted by the horror of her father's unknowing act, into a hope for the future." p.44 Despite the positivistic tone, the argument is effectively that Antigone must die for her father's sins.

[20] 610-612 in Fagles' translation. 542-543 in original.

[21] 615-617 in Fagles' translation. 546-547 in original.

Ismene from ending her own life, a life which, following Chanter's own reasoning, will almost inevitably involve the raising of children at some point. These unborn children will have Oedipus for both their grandfather and their uncle, Jocasta as both great grandmother and grandmother. Their very existence will thus perpetuate Oedipus' crime down through another generation. Accordingly, Antigone's motivations cannot be said to be primarily concerned with re-establishing the incest prohibition, nor can they said to be entirely concerned with the political to the exclusion of the personal.

Another of Chanter's claims is that Antigone's "stubborn refusal to back away from her deeds" is a sign of her political wisdom. [22] This is also questionable. Antigone's actions certainly do suggest that the dominant power(s) within a society can be challenged. But does refusing to back away from her deeds make her more politically effective than Creon? He too stubbornly refuses to give way on his proclamation about the burial of Polynices, which, as Tiresias points out, is the source of the pestilence that plagues the city.[23] Chanter's point is that Antigone's stubborn commitment to her deeds makes her better than Creon; yet it is stubborn commitment to a principle which leads to the ruin of both of these characters. Indeed, it is Creon who at last gives way and he alone who survives. Antigone's unbending will perhaps makes her Creon's equal, but not necessarily anything more.

Chanter's reading of *Antigone* aims to see Antigone and her actions as principled and political, attaching her to the role of the saviour who stands for social cohesion, as represented by her attempt to reinstate the incest principle, and for the oppressed, qua her unyielding challenge to Creon and his authority. It is nonetheless clear that Antigone's motivations cannot be as purely political as Chanter claims, nor are her methods any better than Creon's, which she so ardently and stubbornly opposes.

Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim*

In her 2000 book *Antigone's Claim*, Judith Butler holds Antigone up as the harbinger of a new era of subjectivity unconstrained by traditional social norms of kinship.[24] Butler's reading hones in on the fact that the Oedipus' incestuous relationship with his own mother produced a destabilization of kinship relationships that is carried over on to their children: "Antigone's father is her brother, since they both share a mother in Jocasta, and her brothers are her nephews, sons of her brother-father, Oedipus".[25] Butler notes that in the contemporary era we are seeing a destabilization of traditional

[22] Chanter, T. *Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning*. p.45
[23] Sophocles *Antigone* Lines 998-1032. (1102-1144 in Fagles' translation)
[24] Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2000.
[25] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.57

kinship relationships, with rates of divorce and remarriage increasing, with large numbers of exiled and refugee children seeking adoption in new countries, and with more gay and other non-heterosexual or nuclear families arising than ever before.[26] She invites the reader to:

> Consider that in the situation of blended families, a child says "mother" and might expect more than one individual to respond to the call. Or that, in the case of adoption, a child might say father and might mean both the absent phantasm she never knew as well as the one who assumes that place in living memory.[27]

Butler's contention is that at this point in history new subject positions and types of personal relationships are arising. As a consequence the traditional language of kinship becomes slippery. It becomes increasingly difficult to know precisely what we mean when we use words like "mother" and "father". This is precisely the predicament Antigone finds herself in when she speaks of her love for her brother: she cannot avoid also unintentionally pointing to Oedipus.[28]

In Butler's view, Antigone comes to represent the subject positions of all those who feel themselves excluded by the hegemonic norms of the society they inhabit. Antigone's challenge to Creon´s authority stands for "an alternate legality that haunts the conscious, public sphere as its scandalous future".[29] Wondering what such an alternate legality might look like, Butler suggests a view of kinship that goes beyond the views espoused by Claude Levi-Strauss and other structuralists, which underlie the normative understanding of kinship in present society. On the structuralist account, the incest taboo is a fundamental and universal prohibition and a "general condition of culture".[30] Kinship positions are produced in relation to the prohibition:

> A mother is someone with whom a son and daughter do not have sexual relations, and a father is someone with whom a son and daughter do not have sexual relations, a mother is someone who only has relations with the father, etc.[31]

For Levi-Strauss, these positions take on a universal, trans-historical significance. Butler contends that, in fact, such a definition of kinship is not universal, drawing attention to the work of feminist anthropologists such as Gayle Rubin, Sylvia Yanagisako, Jane Collier, Michelle Rosaldo and David Schneider whose work takes distance from the Levi-Straussian model.[32] She also notes that in the

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[26] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.22
[27] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.69
[28] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.77
[29] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.40
[30] Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship,* ed. Rodney Needham, trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer. Boston; Beacon Press, 1969. p.24
[31] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.18
[32] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.72

1970s socialist feminists sought to show that there is no basis for "normative heterosexual monogamous family structures in nature".[33] She criticizes Lacanians, arguing that in elevating one structure of kinship above all others, they draw a false line between social and symbolic accounts of kinship:

> The Lacanian view suggests that there is an ideal and unconscious demand made upon social life irreducible to socially legible causes and effects. The symbolic place of the father does not cede to the demands for a social reorganization of paternity. The symbolic is precisely what sets limits to any and all utopian efforts to reconfigure and relive kinship relations at some distance from the oedipal scene. [34]

In Butler's view, Lacanians grant that kinship may take multiple forms in material social reality, such as in communities where children are raised as much by their aunts and neighbours as by their own mothers. Yet they still posit a form of kinship based on traditional family roles which exists in the symbolic *irrespective* of how kinship manifests itself socially. In doing this they privilege heteronormative ideas and place the symbolic – as they understand it – above criticism. Essentially, for Lacanians the symbolic is always organized around the idea of a paternal *figure* and a maternal *figure,* even though the social configurations of kinship may be infinitely variable.

Butler takes Antigone as a paradigmatic example of how traditional symbolic roles of kinship fail to include certain individuals within their scopes of meaning, especially in the modern era. Due to her incestuous parentage, her father is also her half-brother, her mother is also her grandmother, and her siblings are both her nephews and her aunt and uncles.[35] Antigone's existence deconstructs the kinship positions that furnish our basic understanding of social reality; she is thus a sort of postmodern heroine. Butler's reading stands as part of the "utopian effort to reconfigure and relive kinship relations" that is described in the quotation above. Antigone, on Butler's account, is a figurehead for this utopian effort.

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[33] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.72-73 Later in the same essay Butler highlights that many of the women from this period who rejected the traditional family structure found themselves seeking treatment on the analyst's couch. She suggests that the subsequent "turn to Lacan" was an attempt to establish the existence of a "presocial law" (the law of the Father), in opposition to the socially constructed account of kinship relations. (p.75) One can only speculate how far the symptoms for which these women sought treatment were the result of their decision to reject traditional modes of being, and whether their symptoms were primarily the result of exclusion (perceived or actual) from a disapproving society, or whether they were caused by the rejection of established patterns of human behaviour like pair-bonding which date far back into evolutionary history and may have an established place in the unconscious minds of individuals.

[34] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.20

[35] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.57

Butler´s reading provides a fascinating vision of a more inclusive social future. Nonetheless, as with many utopian speculations, there are several points on which it may flounder. Whilst Butler supports a liberalization of traditional familial roles, she does not argue against the prohibition of incest itself – in fact, she feels it necessary to assert the very opposite: "it is no doubt important… to refuse the conclusion that the incest taboo must be undone in order for free love to flourish everywhere".[36] Yet her rhetoric cannot disguise the fact that her abstract theorizing does, in fact, leave some very serious doubts about the status of the incest prohibition. In a world where the pre-existing boundaries that define how we interact with those closest to us are lifted, and in which contraception gives us the ability to prevent children being born from incestuous relations, the question could quite plausibly at some point arise: "why could not a brother become one's lover?". If Butler means to assert that despite the liberalization of roles she envisions the incest taboo will magically persist, she grants it the same social and psychic primacy it is given by Levi-Strauss and the Lacanians of whom she is so critical. If, on the other hand, she believes the incest taboo is something that we must take effort to preserve, she reveals an inherent social conservatism of her own. Arguably, the truly liberal position would be the acceptance, even normalization of incestuous sexual relationships. This is not to assert that this position is desirable. Its mention serves merely to highlight the end to which the deconstruction of the existing symbolic positions may ultimately lead – a point that Butler herself seems to want to keep her distance from.[37]

Another point that could be raised against Butler's "utopian" future where kinship roles are dissolved is the question concerning just how it is to be practically brought about. It is one thing to acknowledge that in the modern era families may contain more than one figure who identifies as "mother", but quite another to suggest that such roles may be dispensed with altogether. I cannot help but wonder if the utopian future of "post-kinship" resembles at all Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* where children are raised entirely by the state apparatus and the concept of a parent disappears entirely.[38] It seems to me that such a shift in the organization of social life would require some drastic authoritarian intervention by the state. Furthermore, such a liberation from the

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[36] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* p.24

[37] Biologically the incest prohibition serves an important biological function: it keeps the gene pool wide and minimises the risk of children being born with physical and mental defects. One study describes how "prenatal, neonatal and infant mortality was higher among children from incestuous unions, and mental retardation as well as congenital malformations, single and multiple, were far more frequent among these children than among their half-sibs who were offspring of unrelated parents." See Seemanová, Eva. *A Study of Children of Incestuous Matings.* (1971) <https://www.karger.com/Article/Pdf/152391> accessed 02/05/17. Nonetheless, as I have already suggested, if contraception can give us reasonable assurance that children will not be born of an incestuous union, the question as to what use the incest prohibition continues to serve is one that will perhaps animate thinkers in years to come.

[38] See Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World.* New York, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 especially.

"oppression of the symbolic" seems to necessitate a discarding of the archetypical narratives and characters that underlie present culture: I suspect that in such a "utopian" future, just about every story ever told about a person with a father, a mother, or siblings would seem at best a relic of an outdated past, at worst a story of social oppression.

It must be noted that Butler's reading of *Antigone* does not explicitly mention any of the details I have described above. The faults I identify could thus be accused of being straw men, hypothetical constructions that I have set up purposefully to attack her theory. Butler simply hones in on Antigone as a literary emblem for her own philosophical critique of kinship. She sees Antigone's rebellion against Creon and the laws of the state as the spectre of an "alternate legality" of social life, pregnant with the possibility of redrawing the boundaries that govern interpersonal relationships.[39] Nonetheless, I stand by my approach as an attempt to show where the theoretical deconstruction of kinship seems to point. A less drastic criticism of her position is that it views destabilized kinship positions as a uniquely 20th/21st century phenomena, produced by global migrations, family breakdowns and the increase in the size of the non-heterosexual segment of the population. Yet adoption is by no means a modern phenomenon, and high mortality rates in the past (particularly maternal death in child-birth) meant children often grew up without their biological parents present. Butler's suggestion is that we are now entering an era when the symbolic laws that govern kinship fail to reflect accurately the material reality of social life, but history suggests that this era may in fact be one that has always already existed.

I have attempted to draw attention to the key problems with Butler's philosophical position, problems involving the continuation of the incest taboo, the realities of a "post-kinship" world and the historical validity of her analysis of modernity. However, the biggest flaw in Butler's reading of Antigone relating to the Sophoclean text itself is the assumption that Antigone cares about the political status of her act at all. Butler claims that Antigone stands for the unrepresented and the excluded; yet she is an aristocratic princess, and her brothers, born of exactly the same parentage, fought over which one of them would be king. Furthermore, whilst we may grant that Antigone is caught in a language trap, unable to speak of her "brother" without also invoking her father Oedipus, this unorthodox subject position does not automatically make her a representative of *all* non-hegemonically approved subject positions. To suggest it does is to erroneously conflate the struggles of many different groups. It should be clear that the struggles of a fictional Theban princess, an African refugee without legal identification papers, and an educated lesbian couple adopting a child, are not one and the same. In addition, Antigone's willingness to lay down her life

[39] Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.40

without having children shows that she is not overly attached to her unorthodox subject position, nor is she particularly concerned with continuing the destabilisation of kinship positions that began when the children of Oedipus and Jocasta were born.

In the previous section we examined Chanter's suggestion that Antigone aims to restore the incest principle in her community by refusing a life of motherhood. We saw that this could not be the case since Antigone actively encourages Ismene to keep on living. Ismene's children will unavoidably carry the curse of Oedipus and his incestuous relationship forwards. Thus, by encouraging Ismene to live, Antigone makes it clear that she is not overtly concerned with reinstating the incest prohibition. In contrast to Chanter, Butler suggests that Antigone's actions assert the validity of her and her brother's unorthodox identities, and indeed of unorthodox identities in general. Nonetheless, in wilfully heading towards her death Antigone is herself involved in actively negating this identity. I would suggest that if there is to be an authentic heroic figure who stands for the *continued* validity of non-orthodox kinship and subject positions, that figure should be Ismene, since she alone continues living and embodies the prospect of continuing the incestuous, non-normative Oedipal line.[40] Ultimately it appears that Antigone's act is less clearly motivated by grand utopian political or progressive intentions than either Butler or Chanter would like it to be.

Where then does that leave us? The readings I have discussed above attach some ethical or political significance to Antigone and her actions. I have endeavoured to point out some of the flaws with such readings of Sophocles' play. Chanter seeks to find in Antigone a paradigm for principled political action in the name of both elementary laws of kinship and resistance to an oppressive and unjust state – yet in the end it emerges that Antigone is at least as personally motivated as she is politically and that her stubborn insistence upon death only puts her on par with Creon, not above. Butler focuses on Antigone to push her own deconstructive approach to kinship and social relations, an approach that when taken to its logical conclusions seems to overwrite much that we take for granted about human relations, society and culture. She holds up Antigone as a champion of the excluded, and yet Antigone is an aristocratic princess who is willing to lay down her life and thus give up her unorthodox subject position. The extent to which she actually represents the unrepresented

[40] There is no time to elaborate on this point further here, however it would make an interesting study in its own right. Bonnie Honig explores the character of Ismene in greater depth in her essay "Ismene's Forced Choice: Sacrifice and Sorority in Sophocles' Antigone". *Arethusa* Volume 44, Number 1, Winter 2011 pp. 29-68. Simon Goldhill notes that Butler ignores the fact that Antigone excludes Ismene and effectively turns her into the "other woman". He suggests that feminism may sometimes examine Antigone through a selective lens in order to ensure that she stands out as an ethical hero. He also suggests that the relationship between these two sisters is an important point for feminism to consider, since sisterhood has served as an important metaphor for collective struggle, but disputes over whether universal sisterhood can or should exist amongst women still range. Goldhill, Simon. "Antigone and the Politics of Sisterhood". In: Zajko, V. and Leonard, M. *Laughing with Medusa.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

is thus in the very least questionable. The common thread in these two readings is that Antigone is interpreted to stand for what the critic believes is an admirable cause. I have attempted to show that such readings are in the very least flawed. Slavoj Žižek's recent play *Antigone,* published in 2016, sets out in a very different vein – in his own words, he seeks to make Antigone "part of the problem".[41] It is to his work that the remainder of this thesis shall now turn.

[41] Žižek, Slavoj. *Antigone.* Bloomsbury: London, 2016. xxv

2. Background to Žižek's Antigone

The thought of Slavoj Žižek is heavily indebted to the work of the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. *Antigone* is no exclusion to this rule. In his *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan offers an extended reading of Sophocles *Antigone* in which he discusses the ethical significance of the heroine. It is this reading that informs much of Žižek's interest in the play.[42] In order to understand Žižek's *Antigone* it will thus first be of benefit to explore some of the defining features of Lacan's reading of Sophocles' play. We will then examine how Žižek has worked these ideas into his theoretical discussions of the play in his own early work. This will lay a solid framework from which we can progress to a discussion and analysis of the text of Žižek's *Antigone* itself.

Basics of Lacanian Theory

Before we turn to Lacan's reading of *Antigone* it will be helpful to give an overview of the core concepts of his theory.[43] Lacan takes the basic principles of Freud – Oedipal desire of the mother and jealousy of the father, castration anxiety, the unconscious – but instead of relating them to biological impulses he connects them to the subject's relationship with language. According to structural linguistics, language can be broken down into the relationship between signifiers, words which carry meaning, and signifieds, concepts and objects to which signifiers refer.[44] Language, for Lacan, has a profound but also radically alienating effect on the human subject. This is because it allows it to think and communicate in abstract ways, but also has the effect of "splitting" the subject – it opens a rift between the subject as it empirically ("really") exists, and as it exists *in language* (ie. with regard to the signifiers that refer to it). We can conceptualize this by considering what happens when the subject makes a statement about itself – "I like reading", for example. For Lacan, there are two subjects evoked in even a simple sentence like this: the subject of the enunciation and the subject of

[42] Žižek has described *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* as "one of the few serious candidates for *the* book of the twentieth century". (See the back page of Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*) Works in which Žižek discusses Antigone include Žižek, S. Melancholy and the Act. *Critical Inquiry*, 26(4) (2000) pp.657-681.; *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York; London: Routledge, 1992. *Interrogating the Real;* Butler, R and Stephens, S (ed.). London; New York: Continuum, 2002; *Living in the End Times.* London; New York: Verso, 2010; *Looking Awry, an Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture.* Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT Press, 1991; *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT Press 2006; *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* London: Verso, 1989; *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London; New York: Verso, 2002. For a discussion of Žižek's conception of tragedy in general, see the relevant chapter in Julian Young's *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[43] For the following elaboration I am indebted to Marcus Pound's book *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Eerdmans. 2008.

[44] Saussure, Ferdinand de: *Course in General Linguistics.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959. p.66-7

the statement. The subject of the enunciation is the empirically existing subject who speaks the words "I like reading". The subject of the statement is the grammatical subject of the sentence "I like reading" which exists only in language – the "I". Lacanian theory emphasizes that these two exist independently of each other and can never be fully reconciled. This is what produces the experience of "castration" – a sense of impotency felt as the result of the subject's existence within language.[45]

Lacan gives the psychic world a tripartite structure, to which he gives the names "symbolic", "imaginary" and "real". The symbolic is the realm in which language and law and codes more generally exist. It is the site of the signifiers that the subject uses to describe itself and the world around it.[46] It is where social codes and ideologies exist, as codified patterns of behaviour that govern human interrelationships. Cecilia Sjoholm describes it thus:

> The human order, says Lacan in the 1950s, "is characterised by the fact that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every stage of its existence". The symbolic order is autonomous in relation to the experience of human beings: it is, as Lacan himself puts it, that which is most elevated in man but at the same time not in man at all. This somewhat enigmatic formula means that the symbolic order can be formulated in a number of ways, for example as the law against incest, as the ten commandments, as linguistic rules and so on; but in its most abstract form the symbolic order is simply the castrating cut which makes the subject split and finite in relation to something which he cannot subsume.[47]

We have already touched on the notion that the subject is "castrated". Sjoholm highlights the notion that it is in the symbolic that the subject experiences this castration, the result of its coming into contact with a vast and seemingly autonomous other entity. Sjoholm also emphasizes that the symbolic is a structural term with no definitive content, hence it can be found in many forms, including social, religious and linguistic systems.[48]

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[45] Pound, M. *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* p.11 see also Lacan, J. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955.* Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Sylvana Tomaselli. London and New York: Norton, 1991. p.244

[46] Žižek, S. *How To Read Lacan.* London and New York: Norton, 2006. p.9

[47] Sjöholm, Cecilia. Family Values: Butler, Lacan and The Rise of Antigone. *Radical Philosophy* vol. 111 2002. pp.24-32. p.27

[48] This point about the symbolic being a structural entity with no fixed content is echoed in Žižek's critique of Butler's argument in *Antigone's Claim* against Lacan. Butler claims that psychoanalysis prescribes a heteronormative ideal of kinship relationships, pointing to the fact that Lacan describes the Mother and the Name of the Father as the two early entities that a human infant comes into contact with. Žižek argues that Lacan uses these to describe structural functions that may be filled by individuals of either gender. On such a view Lacan's terminology seems arbitrary, however it does stress the link between his ideas and the work of Sigmund Freud, who posited that the child's unconscious relationships with its mother and father have formative effects on the psyche. See Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. p.20 (and my discussion in Chapter 1); Žižek, S. *Antigone* xxiii.

An important Lacanian concept relating to the symbolic is the Big Other. This term refers to the symbolic as an agent that lurks in the background behind all social relations. Žižek elaborates:

> Symbolic space acts like a yardstick against which I can measure myself. This is why the Big Other can be personified or reified in a single agent: the "God" who watches over me from beyond, and over all real individuals, or the Cause that involves me (Freedom, Communism, Nation) and for which I am ready to give my life. While talking, I am never merely a "small other" (individual) interacting with other "small others": the Big Other must always be there.[49]

The Big Other is the gaze that perpetually watches over individuals in their relations with one another. This gaze, and how the individual feels and acts as a consequence of its presence, is informed by the particular symbolic in which the individual exists and participates. If an individual exists in Christian symbolic space, the Big Other is God; if an individual exists in communist symbolic space, the Big Other is the collective idea of "the People" and the objective necessity of history. The Big Other appears as if it is prior to the symbolic which it mandates: it appears as the point from which the entirety of symbolic codes and practises emanate.[50]

The Lacanian imaginary contains the images and concepts that the subject perceives to exist in itself and in the world. It relates to the experience a child has when it first recognizes itself in the mirror. A child has little coordination over its body and the whirl of emotions and needs to which it is constantly in thrall, but in the mirror "the sight alone of the whole form of the human body gives the subject an imaginary mastery over his body".[51] This is a powerful moment in the development of the child. The imaginary becomes the locus of the developing subject's ego identifications; it is where it forms and holds concrete images of the world, itself and its identity.[52]

The real is the third realm and defines the point at which the symbolic and imaginary begin to break down. It is the realm of that which is unsymbolized, that which cannot be integrated or made sense

[49] Žižek, S. *How To Read Lacan.* London and New York: Norton, 2006. p.9
[50] Žižek, S. *How To Read Lacan.* London and New York: Norton, 2006. pp.7-12
[51] *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, I. Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by John Forrester. London and NewYork: Norton, 1991. p.79
[52] Pound, M. *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* p.11.

of in the manifestation of the symbolic that a subject currently inhabits.[53] Marcus Pound describes it as "the point where the coherency of a moment is pierced and the symbolic support of one's identity begins to give way."[54] He notes that the real is sometimes referred to by Lacan as the Thing (*das Ding)*, a name which "evokes resonances with Kant's *noumenon,* an object not discernible to sensible intuition, discernible only in terms of the effects it produces."[55] The real is elusive and tricky to describe – the very point is that it is that which is not symbolized, and thus there is no language that can accurately describe it.[56]

Lacan's reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*

In the light of this contextual frame, we now turn to Lacan's reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis.* For Lacan, Antigone is a fascinating character because she sacrifices everything in the pursuit of her desire to bury her brother.[57] Lacan sees the passage in which Antigone claims she would have only acted the way she did for Polyneices (and not for a husband or a child) as crucial. He comments that:

> Antigone's position represents the unique limit that affirms the unique value of [Polyneices'] being without reference to any content, to whatever good or evil Polynices may have done, or whatever he may be subjected to. The unique value involved is essentially that of

[53] Lacan, J. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis, 1963-1964*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Vintage, 1998. p.55

[54] Pound, M. *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (p.10) See also Lacan J. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis, 1963-1964.* p.55

[55] Pound, M. *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* p.10, see also Kant, Immanuel *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn. London: Everyman, 1993. p.211.

[56] In a way the real reminds me of the concepts in physics of dark matter and energy, which we cannot directly observe and can only trace via their effects on observable physical phenomena in space. See note 184 for more on psychoanalytic theory and physics. In *How To Read Lacan* Žižek describes the difference between the imaginary, symbolic and real by relating them to the game of chess. The imaginary of chess is what gives the pieces their forms and names – knight, king, queen and so on. The symbolic defines the rules of the game, and how each piece may move. The real is everything else that may affect the game but that cannot be inscribed in any formal way: the temperaments of the players, external circumstances that might cut the game short etc. Žižek, S. *How To Read Lacan.* London and New York: Norton, 2006. pp.8-9

[57] Patricia Johnson offers a more traditional psychoanalytic interpretation of the play, arguing that Antigone's obsession with burying Polyneices is a transference of an intense oedipal relationship with her father. Johnson also argues that Antigone's lack of interest in her marriage to Haemon reflects her intense emotional attachment to the men in her family. Johnson suggests that Sophocles' *Antigone* reflects the psychological experiences of Athenian women in the 5th century, who were kept away from all men unrelated to them until their marriages and who consequently experienced intense oedipal connections with male family members that extended far beyond the days of early childhood. See Johnson, Patricia J. "Woman's Third Face: A Psycho/Social Reconsideration of Antigone," *Arethusa* 30 no. 3 (1997) pp.369-98. For a discussion of how Sophocles' *Antigone* reflects tensions in the family lives of 5th century Athenian women from a non-psychoanalytical perspective, see Sorum, C.E. "The Family in Sophocles' Antigone and Electra," *The Classical World* 75 (1982) pp.201-211.

> language. Outside of language it is inconceivable, and the being of him who has lived cannot be detached from all he bears with him in the nature of good and evil, of destiny, of consequences for others, or of feelings for himself. That purity, that separation of being from the characteristics of the historical drama he has lived through, is precisely the limit or the *ex nihilo* to which Antigone is attached. It is nothing more than the break that the very presence of language inaugurates in the life of man.[58]

Antigone stands for this limit, this *ex nihilo*. The temporality of the prepositional phrase "*ex nihilo*" is crucial to emphasize – Antigone does not stand for *nihil,* the signifier of nothingness,[59] but rather the very point of emergence from *nihil.* It is the limit where the symbolic touches the real, where the symbol meets the unsymbolized, the site of the "signifying cut" that defines the Lacanian subject. The phrase "whatever he may be subjected to" must be read in light of Lacan's precise definition of "subject", as the "bearer" of signifiers produced by the symbolic.[60] For Lacan, the poetic image of Antigone uncompromisingly insisting that Polyneices deserves a burial, regardless of his crimes, is a perfect artistic representation of the idea that the subject is split, that part of its being resides in the realm of law and language – the symbolic. [61] Antigone as a dramatic figure stands for the precise conceptual point where the real of the subject touches the symbolic in the subject. Lacan restates this point, commenting that:

> Antigone appears as αὐτόνομος [*autonomous*]*,* as a pure and simple relationship of the human being to that of which he miraculously happens to be the bearer, namely, the

[58] Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960* p.344

[59] Note that in this sense *nihil* is not synonymous with absolute void of non-Being. It is better imagined along the lines of the formless chaos described in theology as prior to the instigation of Being – a formless chaos that exists but lacks definition and categorization.

[60] Mark De Kesel explains this conception thus: "Lacan takes the word subject in the strictly lexical meaning of the term. "Subjectum" is the Latin translation of the Greek "hypokeimenon" and means bearer, platform, base. Originally, it is the word Aristotelian logic uses for the 'bearer' of attributes. In the proposition "the table is red", table is the "hypokeimenon". It is this word that since Late Antiquity has been translated as "subjectum"". The human subject is the bearer of attributes but also crucially of signifiers, which are in a sense fragments of the symbolic. It is the subject in this capacity as a bearer which exists prior and externally to symbolization, as the blank canvas upon which imagery is inscribed. See De Kesel, Mark. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act" *Studies in East European Thought*, 56(4), 2004, pp.299-334. p.331 n.7

[61] It is for this reason that Lacan rejects the reading of Hegel, who sees Antigone as the defender of the law of the family. This is also why he dismisses Goethe's wish to erase a passage in which Antigone proclaims she would not have acted as she did for any other individual than Polyneices (lines 904-920 in the Greek text). Both of these critics want to see Antigone as the defender of the divine principle of the family. For Lacan, Antigone stands for something, as we have seen, but it is not the principle that these German scholars identify. See Eckermann, Johann. *Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe*. trans: R.O. Moon. London, Morgan Laird, 1950. Conversation of 28 March 1827; Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960* p.312-315. For more on the passage Goethe wished to erase, see note 181.

> signifying cut that confers on him the indomitable power of being what he is in the face of everything that may oppose him.[62]

Once again Lacan connects Antigone with the limit point, the *ex nihilo* which is the site of the "signifying cut" that defines the Lacanian subject. The description stresses the universality of the signifying cut: the subject "happens" to be its bearer, and this is not the result of a wilful choice but rather an inescapable component of subjectivity.[63] Elsewhere, Lacan comments that "Antigone chooses to be purely and simply the guardian of the being of the criminal as such". [64] This imbues her act with a universal significance: it stands for the value of Being as such – Being which, no matter the crime, has value. Whatever the criminal has done, Antigone stands for the fact that this is not the be-all and end-all of his (or her) being. He has a name, a position in the inter-subjective symbolic network that cannot be denied. Mohammad Kowsar points out that in defending the being of Polyneices Antigone is also defending her own being: "Polynices is her brother; he has had a name, and for her he is "unique." To assert the integrity of his "being" is to recover her own "being."[65] To defend the unique value of the being of the other, no matter the crimes he has committed, is thus to defend the being of oneself.[66] Antigone stands for the absolute value of being.

There is a second key element to Lacan's reading of Antigone, which relates to the mechanism of Antigone's desire. There are two key phrases that relate to how Lacan understands Antigone's desire. The first is that she "reveals the line of sight that defines desire".[67] The second is that "she pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire".[68] Taken together, the implication is that "the line of sight that defines desire" is something which is inextricably linked to death. In Lacanian theory the cause

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[62] Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.348

[63] The association of Antigone with autonomy is also worth noting, as it implies that Antigone is acting independently and in accordance with her own rule, and further, that there is something unique about this fact. See note 96 for more on Antigone's autonomy.

[64] Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.348

[65] Kowsar, Mohammad. Lacan's "Antigone": A Case Study in Psychoanalytical Ethics. *Theatre Journal, Vol. 42, No. 1 (March 1990)*, pp. 94-106 p.104

[66] I am reminded of the moment in the biblical story of Cain and Abel where, having cast Cain out and condemned him to a life of vagrancy and toil, God claims he will bring vengeance sevenfold on anyone who harms him (Genesis 4:15). For me, this passage seems to point at the same kernel in the being of the criminal that Lacan makes Antigone stand for – a kernel which, despite its crimes, demands protection.
A friend interpreted this passage a different way, suggesting God's promise to punish reflects a desire to perpetuate Cain's suffering for as long as possible – a sort of "death would be the easy way out" approach to the being of the criminal. These two alternatives seem to correspond (perhaps tentatively) to the roles Antigone and Creon play with relation to Polyneices – the former demands his proper burial, focusing on the value of his being despite his heinous crimes; the latter denies him burial, effectively elongating his life beyond its natural limits as a punishment and as a warning to other would be criminals.

[67] Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.304

[68] Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.348

of desire is associated with the fact that the subject never has direct, unmediated access to the real – "reality" as experienced is always filtered through the symbolic. Kirshner describes how:

> For Lacan, the inability of the symbolic to totally encompass its referents and to represent fully what has been lost [the concrete object of reference] creates a constant gradient of desire, a perpetual reaching out for the pure reality behind representation. In the Lacanian formula, desire "insists" in the signifying chain of human speech, straining towards dimly perceived goals and the deferred promise of complete satisfaction. Because achievement of this aim is impossible, we substitute fantasies of sexual, romantic, narcissistic, or material accomplishment that stitch desire to the fabric of social reality, and we convince ourselves that we will be satisfied by realizing them. Desire thus becomes "libidinized" and diverted to existing symbolic objects.[69]

Desire in its purest form aims at that which is beyond the realm of experience, the perpetually deferred "promise of complete satisfaction". The late Lacan gives a name to this "object-cause of desire" – *object petit a*.[70] As Kirshner highlights, this is distinguished from standard objects of "libidinized" desire, objects that exist in social reality – lovers, promotions, possessions – which are ultimately only substitutions that stand in for the unattainable *object petit a.*[71]

We have seen that Lacan places special significance on Antigone and the way that she desires. Cecilia Sjoholm writes:

> [In Lacan] Desire is no longer depicted as a striving towards the possession of an object, but as a movement of return towards an elusive origin. Antigone's desire may be interpreted in various ways: directed towards the brother, the mother of the common womb, death, the dead body of the brother, and so on. None of these, however, presents itself as an object that would be sustained by a recognizable symbolic order, and the actual cause of Antigone's desire remains foreclosed. Thus […] we could perhaps say that the Antigone complex is a figure for desire in a symbolic order which *fails to provide the fictional objects that would sustain it.*[72]

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[69] Kirshner, L.A. Rethinking Desire: The Object Petit a in Lacanian Theory. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Association.* Winter;53(1) 2005 pp.83-102. p.85

[70] Here Kirshner refers to seminar XII, April 9 1974 and elsewhere in seminars IV, IX, X, XI, XIII, XIV, XVII, XVIII.

[71] For an in depth discussion of the Lacanian object-cause of desire, see Fink, Bruce. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. pp.83-97

[72] Sjöholm, C. "Family Values: Butler, Lacan and The Rise of Antigone" p.28

For a discussion of how Lacan's conception of desire plays out in a clinical setting, see Fink, Bruce. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian psychoanalysis,* Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1997. chapter 5.

The final sentence of this passage makes clear the significance of Antigone's desire: Antigone experiences a desire that cannot be sustained by the substitutions of the symbolic. It thus strays into the beyond, to the "elusive origin", the inaccessible realm from where desire emerges. Such a desire is both pure and terrible – in aiming straight at the core of desire Antigone rejects the substitutions of the symbolic and positions herself outside the limits of what is ordinarily human. Recall from the discussion above that Lacan explicitly connects Antigone's desire with the desire of death.[73] His reading stresses Antigone's fascination with death multiple times.[74] The significance of Antigone's desire is that it aims at the roots of desire as such, the real object, the *object petit a*. Such an impossible object of desire is attainable only through the sacrifice of life (and desire) itself.

In Lacan's reading, Antigone thus comes to stand for the inherent value of being and for the purest form of desire.[75] For these reasons Lacan chooses her as a model for his ethics of psychoanalysis.[76] However, a crucial and perhaps paradoxical final point is that Lacan stresses that Antigone is *not* a model to be emulated in the real world. This is made clear by his comment that:

> like all executioners and tyrants at bottom, [Creon is] a human character. Only the martyrs know neither pity nor fear. Believe me, the day when the martyrs are victorious will be the day of universal conflagration. The play is calculated to demonstrate that fact.[77]

Here Antigone is the figure to whom Creon is compared, to whom the line "the martyrs who know neither pity nor fear" points to. It is she who uncompromisingly follows her principle to her death, whilst Creon concedes his position after his encounter with Tiresias. Creon is a "human character"; Antigone is something else. According to this passage, Antigone is a model for an ethics in an abstract sense, but *not* as a model for action. Her attachment to the value of being is a powerful humanistic gesture, but her unwavering attachment to her desire is as terrifying as it is pure, and threatens to bring about "the day of universal conflagration". In following her desire, Antigone acts

[73] Lacan, J. *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.348

[74] For example: "Lines 559-560 give us Antigone's attitude toward life. She tells us that her soul died long ago and that she is destined to give help… to the dead." Lacan, J. *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.332; "From Antigone's point of view life can only be approached, can only be lived or thought about, from the place of that limit where her life is already lost, where she is already on the other side." p.345; "Antigone herself has been declaring from the beginning: 'I am dead and I desire death.'" p.346

[75] Miriam Leonard notes that Lacan contrasts Antigone's "pure" desire with the impure and incestuous desire of her mother, Jocasta. In her view, Lacan's reading of the play is based on a traditional, even misogynistic view of sexual morality that sees "pure" feminine desire as sexless, not active and erotic. Leonard, Miriam. "Lacan, Irigaray and Beyond". In: Zajko, V. and Leonard, M. *Laughing with Medusa.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006. For another critical discussion of Lacan's reading of *Antigone* from a feminist perspective, see Pollock, Griselda. "Beyond Oedipus", also in Zajko, V. and Leonard, M. *Laughing with Medusa.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006

[76] Note that this is the name of the seminar in which he presents his reading of Antigone.

[77] Lacan, J. *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.329

in a way that is pure, but not for us "mere humans" to replicate. Paul Allen Miller highlights that the Lacanian ethic of following pure desire promises not "the reign of the good, but a world of beautiful yet monstrous enjoyment".[78] We can only speculate as to what this world of "beautiful yet monstrous enjoyment" would look like, but Lacan's image of "universal conflagration" suggests that he himself is hesitant to proscribe that we all in our own way become Antigone.

Žižek's early work on *Antigone* and The Act

The critical work of Slavoj Žižek's uses ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyse culture and politics at large.[79] He inherits Lacan's interest in *Antigone* and includes discussions of the play and its eponymous heroine in many of his books. His discussions preserve the character of Lacan's analysis, commenting at different times in his own early work on her liminality and the fact that there is something sublime about her but also something inhuman.[80]

In *Living in the End Times*, Žižek describes how Antigone acts as a "demonic and uncanny" agent who disturbs the smooth running (*eunomia*) of the state and goes "beyond human boundary.[81] Nonetheless he argues that Antigone's principle – that Polyneices has an inalienable right to be buried, regardless of his dreadful actions – is an early form of the quality known by Christians as the Holy Spirit, which over the course of two millennia developed into the notion of universal human rights that pervades in the West today. Žižek states that Antigone's act is invested with a new form of ethics, alien to the pagan Greeks, but integral to societies founded on the Judaeo-Christian tradition.[82] In this analysis Žižek's indebtedness to Lacan's ideas shines through: Antigone stands for the inherent value of human Being, however through her actions and commitment to her principle

[78] Miller, Paul Allen. "Lacan's Antigone: The Sublime Object and the Ethics of Interpretation". *Phoenix*, vol. 61, no. 1/2, 2007, pp. 1–14. p.12

[79] This is becoming a popular form of theoretical analysis, particularly amongst left leaning critics. See eg. Stavrakakis, Yannis. *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics.* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007. See also any of Žižek's works referenced in this thesis for examples of how he analyses politics using Lacanian ideas.

[80] On Antigone's Liminality see Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* London: Verso, 1989 p.135. On her beauty see *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p.35; Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.305. On her inhumanity see *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.329, Žižek, S. *Interrogating the Real*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. p.347

[81] Žižek S. *Living in the End Times*. London; New York: Verso, 2010. p.104

[82] Žižek S. *Living in the End Times* p.104; Recently it was reported in the British media that the body of one of the London Bridge terror attackers was buried in secret by a family member, after 130 imams refused to perform funeral prayers. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/london-bridge-attacker-khuram-butt-buried-secret-funeral-muslim-imams-refuse-islam-a7856551.html> accessed 30/11/17. I find it fascinating to compare the burials of Polyneices – arguably an "ancient terrorist" – and contemporary terrorists. Whilst in the modern era the British government did not deny the London bridge terrorist a right to burial, it was a family member who took the body to burial after it was denied symbolic recognition by the religious community. Interestingly this contrasts with the disposal of the body of Osama bin Laden, who was reportedly buried at sea shortly after his death.

she becomes a frightening and inhuman character. Notice that by bringing in the notion of human rights, Žižek subtly politicizes the point about the value of Being, which for Lacan referred specifically to the structure of the psyche and the *ex nihilo* which cuts the subject. This politicization counts for Žižek's primary contribution to the Lacanian discussion of Antigone.

Part of what makes Antigone so interesting for the early Žižek is that she seems to perform a political "Act". The Žižekian Act is an action which stands distinct from normal, everyday action. An Act is a transgression that goes beyond the limits of the symbolic community to which one belongs. It is:

> an intervention into social reality that changes the very coordinates of what is perceived to be possible; it is not simply beyond the good, it redefines what counts as good.[83]

The Act is revolutionary, appearing first as a transgression, but subsequently redefining itself as an ethical act and a necessary step on the way to the future – a future free from the tyrannies of the formerly existing social structure.[84] It founds itself on the idea that the prevailing discourse of truth in a society is incomplete, lacking, and consequently it jumps into the lack, leaving all such claims to truth behind.[85] The Act is the occasion for radical change, and can be conceptualized as the appearance of the Real in the closed circuit of the Symbolic. Rejecting Creon's prohibition of Polyneices' burial in the name of another principle, Antigone performs the first steps of an Act, smashing the absoluteness of Creon's law and paving the way for something else to take its place. Žižek points to Antigone as the heroic example of the Act, commenting that she "effectively puts at risk her entire social existence, defying the socio-symbolic power of the city embodied in the rule of Creon, thereby falling into some kind of death".[86]

Multiple critics have commented on Žižek's choice of Antigone as an exemplar of the Act. Sarah De Sanctis states that "for Žižek, [Antigone] acts, defying the Law and showing its inherent contradiction – Creon's violence, which is an exception to the very law he stands for – opening up, in this way, the possibility of a new social order".[87] Alan Johnson observes a similar attitude towards Antigone in Žižek: "Žižek takes [Antigone's act] as an exemplar of a properly political Act: driven and excessive,

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[83] Žižek, S. Melancholy and the Act. *Critical Inquiry*, 26(4), 2000: pp.657-681 p.672

[84] See Žižek, S. *Disparities* London, Verso, 2016. pp.277-291 for a more in-depth discussion on the retroactive effect. A friend once remarked to me that this is just a new formulation of the old dictum that "history is written by the victor".

[85] De Kesel, M. Act without Denial: "Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act". *Studies in East European Thought*, 56(4), 2004. pp.299-334 p.317

[86] Žižek, S. "From "passionate attachments" to dis-identification." *Umbr(a)*, 1, 1998 pp. 3–17 p.6-7

[87] De Sanctis, Sarah. "From Psychoanalysis to Politics: Antigone as a Revolutionary in Judith Butler and Žižek." *Opticon1826,* 14. 2012 pp.27-36 p.31.

pursued to the end, ignoring the consequences."[88] Note that Johnson's comment highlights the brutality of the Act and reminds us that it is a violent revolutionary transgression. Yannis Stavrakakis criticizes Žižek and suggests that his choice of Antigone as a model for the authentic political Act is irrational. Burying Polyneices, Stavrakakis comments, "was never a case of an act effecting a displacement of the status quo. Her act is a one-off and she couldn't' care less about what will happen in the *polis* after her suicide".[89] However, in *In Defense of Lost Causes* Žižek explicitly refutes Stavrakakis' criticism, emphasizing the symbolic stakes of Antigone's act. "Far from just throwing herself into the arms of death, Sophocles' Antigone insists up to her death on performing a precise symbolic gesture: the proper burial of her brother".[90]

In *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek tells us that there is always something uncanny about the individual who performs an Act. Recall from the earlier discussion that the Lacanian subject is defined as the vessel that "bears" signifiers, constructing itself in the symbolic.[91] Žižek writes that:

> If there is a subject to the act, it is not the subject of subjectivization, of integrating the act into the universe of symbolic integration and recognition, of assuming the act as 'my own', but rather an uncanny, "acephalous" subject through which the act takes place as which is 'in him more than himself [one of Lacan's formulations of das Ding or *object a*.][92]

In an Act, the subject leaves behind the realm of normal human subjectivity, the "universe of symbolic integration and recognition", and becomes something else, the "uncanny acephalous subject" possessed by "das Ding or *object a*". The subject's existence in the symbolic – the intersubjective network that both gives meaning to its actions and alienates it from itself – is "momentarily suspended".[93] Furthermore, Žižek writes:

> In an authentic Act, the highest freedom coincides with the utmost passivity, with a reduction to a lifeless automaton who blindly performs its gestures.[94]

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[88] Johnson, Alan. "Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Revolution: A Critique." *Global Discourse*, 2:1, 2011 pp.150-166, p.156

[89] Stavrakis, Yannis. *The Lacanian Left,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007 p.115 Susan Ford Wiltshire likewise argues that Antigone's actions are entirely apolitical. Wiltshire, Susan Ford. "Antigone's Disobedience," *Arethusa* 9 (1976) pp.29-36

[90] Žižek, S. *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Verso, London. 2008 p.305

[91] De Kesel, M. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act". p.331 n.7. See note 60 for a discussion of the Lacanian subject as one that "bears" signifiers.

[92] Žižek. S. *The Ticklish Subject*, London, Verso, 1999 p.374-5

[93] Žižek, S. *The Ticklish Subject* p.375

[94] Žižek, S. *The Ticklish Subject* p.375

The "highest freedom" – freedom from all the restrictions of the symbolic, a wild leap into the unknown – is paradoxically achieved only by sacrificing one's agency to this "highest freedom", by becoming the passive "lifeless automaton" that allows the Act to take place through itself. Žižek states that the reaction of the subject to an authentic Act is of the form "Even I don't know how I was able to do that, it just happened!"[95] Antigone, as one who performs an Act, becomes this "uncanny, "acephalous" subject", the "lifeless automaton" who "blindly performs its gestures".[96] This explains why Žižek elsewhere has described her as frightening, inhumane, and strange – in Acting, she departs from the shared intersubjective field of meaning and becomes something radically other, alien, and outside.[97]

Mark De Kesel has criticized Žižek's theory of the Act, focusing specifically on the point about the lifeless automation as the subject of the Act. He argues that the moment one attempts to perform a "desubjectivized" Act, an Act that violently leaves behind the symbolic, one simply becomes the instrument of (another) Other, the pawn of an external but still concretely existing law (eg. the objective necessity of history or the principle that a brother *must* be buried).[98] In other words, one cannot help but lapse into a totalitarian way of thinking which elevates one principle into the highest good, for which all else may be sacrificed. For Žižek the Act relies on the fact that any symbolic system is not-whole, lacking, and excludes a certain element, despite the fact that it attempts to posit itself as complete. The Act "jumps" into the excluded, the lack, and makes it clear that the currently existing symbolic is not-whole.[99] De Kesel argues that the Act asserts itself in the name of a principle, which is really just another Other, a different symbolic. Thus, "an anti-totalitarian

[95] Žižek, S. *The Ticklish Subject* p.375

[96] In a passage quoted earlier Lacan describes Antigone as "autonomous". Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.348 This is a subtle but notable contrast with Žižek, who implicitly likens Antigone to an "automaton". The former suggests an agency that is radically self-governing, the latter an agency that is alienated from itself and acts as if it is controlled by external forces. In Lacanian theory the two can be linked: to follow one's desire absolutely is both to take complete control of the self and to submit to a force beyond one's control in the same instant. To use an example from everyday life – I might decide to forsake all else and pursue a loved one with every fibre of my being, *and yet* the very act of falling in love is *not* a decision that can be made, it is something bizarre that "happens" to me without my consent. I might influence the process by choosing to avoid or spend more time with the person I suspect I might be in danger of falling in love with, but this is far from exerting absolute control over the matter. It is a tragic fact known to many that one simply cannot force oneself to fall in or out of love.

[97] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p.117 In *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek states that the political act *par excellence* is revolution. He claims that the perpetrator must not shy away from its inherent "terroristic" nature; in fact, he must embrace it. His language here is brutal and clear: "a proper political act unleashes the force of negativity that shatters the very foundations of our being" p.377. Furthermore, he goes as far as to claim that "the horrible experience of Stalinist political terror should *not* lead us into abandoning the principle of terror itself – one should search even more stringently for the "good terror"" p.378. Such an incitement to terror – even "good terror" – I find troubling. To the perpetrator of terror such acts always appear as "good".

[98] De Kesel, M. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act" p.323-4

[99] De Kesel, M. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act" p.317

acknowledgement [of the lack of the symbolic] seems to coincide with a totalitarian denial [of the lack in the new symbolic]".[100] In De Kesel's judgement, Žižek's thought "constantly circles around [this problem] without ever finding a satisfying solution".[101] Antigone proves a good example of this problem: she breaks with the symbolic (as embodied in Creon's law) only by choosing another principle (that Polyneices must be buried), a principle to which she attaches herself absolutely, performing what De Kesel describes as a gesture of "totalitarian denial".[102]

The issue raised by De Kesel lies at the forefront of Žižek's 2016 play *Antigone.* What we see in this play is a dramatic re-articulation of Žižek's attitude towards the heroine. Whilst in his early work she was, despite her uncanny inhumanity, still in principle an ethical model for the revolutionary Act, she is now, as his introduction makes clear, portrayed as "part of the problem".[103] The play makes Antigone's commitment to her principle that Polyneices must be buried at any cost into a totalitarian, inhuman gesture, and her actions are totally separated from any potential political resonances that they might once have carried. Antigone is portrayed as a self-absorbed and vain character whose obsession with burying Polyneices is a freakish attempt to deny the chaotic and contingent character of the world. The play thus reacts to the philosophical tradition, both in Žižek's own writings and in the work of others like Butler and Chanter, of viewing Antigone as a progressive political heroine who has ethical value as a figure of principled resistance.[104] In this way it seems to offer a return to the conclusion of Lacan's reading, which noted that despite Antigone's ethical

[100] De Kesel, M. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act" p.319
[101] De Kesel, M. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act" p.319
[102] De Kesel, M. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act" p.319
I believe I have noticed a real-world example of "totalitarian denial" in my participation in the alternative/heavy metal subculture. In its own eyes this subculture exists as a haven of those who feel themselves excluded from society. The entire aesthetic is based on rejecting societal norms: visually, with tattoos, piercings, uncommon hairstyles and black clothing; musically, with abrasive, aggressive sounds and vocal styles; thematically, with artwork and lyrics focusing on death, misery, pain, fantasy, paganism, anti-humanism and anti-modernism (etc.). The subculture preaches tolerance, acceptance and diversity. Yet it is also often highly conservative and exclusive. It rejects the mainstream by remaining distinct from it. Certain bands, genres and dress styles have been criticized within the alternative community for being "too mainstream" or "not metal enough". In Lacanian terms, the subculture exists in the lack in the social symbolic, in the place excluded by normative standards of beauty, art and identity. Yet here it sets up its own symbolic that is as exclusive as the norms it seeks to distinguish itself from. Essentially it commits a gesture of "totalitarian denial", jumping into the lack in the symbolic only to deny its own lack. Other examples of "totalitarian denial" are readily available, for example in the world of sectarian identity politics, where individuals attempting to fight systems of "privilege" often refuse to listen to those who are deemed to hold "privilege". Here the attempt to deconstruct one exclusive societal discourse only sets up its own parallel exclusive discourse. The dilemma facing our time is how to move beyond old exclusive discourses without setting up new ones. The difficulty lies in the fact that knowledge and language themselves are systems of categorization that are inherently exclusive: a thing only exists as something "other" than something else.
[103] Žižek, S. *Antigone* xxiv
[104] See Chapter 1

status, the day of her martyr's victory will be "the day of universal conflagration."[105] Yet, despite abandoning his depiction of Antigone as an authentic subject of the Act, Žižek does not altogether dispense with his political readings of Sophocles' play and his work on the performance of an Act. In his play's third ending the Chorus becomes the "true" subject of the Act, revolting in the name of democratic politics and freedom from monarchical tyranny. In the following chapter we will explore in depth how Žižek portrays the heroine of his *Antigone*, emphasizing her problematic character, her inhumanity and narcissistic tendencies. In the subsequent chapter we shall explore the way that the Chorus becomes the "authentic" subject of the Act.[106]

[105] Lacan. J. *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* p.329

[106] Given that the focus of this thesis is on resistance to authority and the Žižekian Act, Creon features comparatively little in our discussions in comparison with Antigone and the Chorus. This is not to deny the role that he plays in *Antigone,* both in the Sophoclean text and in Žižek's version. Regarding Sophocles' *Antigone* James Hogan argues that Creon is at least as central a character in the play as Antigone, whilst W.M. Calder III. concludes that Creon is the protagonist. See n.3 Hogan, James. "The Protagonists of the "Antigone"". *Arethusa*, Spring 1972, Vol.5(1), pp.93-100.). W. M. Calder III, "The Protagonist of Sophocles' Antigone," Arethusa 4.1 49 (1971)

3. The problems with Antigone

Žižek's *Antigone*

In the introduction to his 2016 play *Antigone,* Žižek writes:

> The problem with Antigone is not the suicidal purity of her death drive but – quite the opposite – that the monstrosity of her act is covered up by its aestheticization: the moment she is excluded from the community of humans, she turns into a sublime apparition evoking our sympathy by complaining about her plight.[107]

This quotation neatly sums up Žižek's contention with the Greek heroine: there is something startlingly unique about her, but this is not something to celebrate. Rather, Antigone is a monster who has found a way to present herself as a tragic hero worthy of remembrance – her monstrosity is aestheticized. In one early scene Antigone laments the cruelty of her fate and compares herself to Niobe, "the daughter of Tantalus". She claims that "God brings me to a final rest which most resembles hers".[108] In Greek mythology Niobe was a queen who boasted to the goddess Leto of her remarkable capacity for mothering children (Niobe had fourteen children, Leto only two – Apollo and Artemis). To punish her for her arrogance Leto sent Apollo and Artemis to kill all fourteen of Niobe's children. Devastated, Niobe fled to Mount Sipylus where she wept until at long last she was transformed into a stone that continuously poured out water. With this comparison Antigone seeks to highlight that she is the victim of some power far beyond her own, whilst also suggesting that in death she will be immortalized in story like the mythical queen, attaining a rest which "most resembles hers". Žižek's Chorus replies scathingly, criticizing her vanity and the way she tries to paint herself as a martyr:

> It's a fine thing for a woman,
> once she's dead, to have it said she shared,
> in life and death, the fate of demi-gods.
> But you, Antigone, you're not yet dead
> and while still alive, you already weave a myth
> about yourself, imagining how you will look when dead.
> When you talk like that, no tears can be shed,
> Only a smile can pass our lips – a smile at a girl

[107] Žižek, S. *Antigone* xv
[108] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.12

> In love with herself, vain enough to think
> about her look even when she is about to die.
> Yes, you sacrificed everything, but you did not sacrifice
> your sacrifice itself. You gave away everything,
> but you did not give away your act of giving itself.
> It's only when you do that, when you not only disappear,
> but when your very act of disappearing disappears,
> that you are no longer in love with yourself,
> with your noble gesture, and reach true modesty.[109]

The Chorus immediately shuts down Antigone's attempt to compare herself to Niobe and claims that it is not the place of the individual herself to define who or what myth her life resembles – this task, it implies, belongs to those who come afterwards who decide if the events of the life in question form a tale worth telling future generations. The comment "while still alive, you already weave a myth about yourself, imagining how you will look when you are dead" attacks the fact that she is already considering her own prospects of being mythologized. It suggests that Antigone is concerned with appearances, not the principles themselves which she claims to be acting for. The Chorus drives this home when it calls her "a girl in love with herself, vain enough to think about her look even when she is about to die".[110] The Chorus suspects that Antigone's insistence on burying Polynices, regardless of the cost, is motivated less by her firm conviction in her principles than by her desire to be seen as one who holds firm convictions in her principles. Her ultimate concern is with the aesthetic of her life and death – not the principle for which she is willing to die.

There is a clear indication that at this moment Žižek is using the Chorus as the vessel through which to speak his own judgement about Antigone. The phrase "Yes, you sacrificed everything, but you did not sacrifice the sacrifice itself" is found nowhere in Sophocles' *Antigone*. It is in fact lifted straight from a passage in *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* a passage worth quoting here in full. Žižek is describing a mother who is consistently exploited by her family and complains about her suffering:

> [Her] "silent sacrifice" is her imaginary identification: it gives consistency to her self-identity – if we take this incessant sacrificing from her, nothing remains; she literally loses ground…
>
> …the true meaning of the mother's complaint is: "I'm ready to give up, to sacrifice everything… *everything but the sacrifice itself!"*. What the poor mother must do, if she wants

[109] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.12
[110] One might also notice the fact that Niobe was punished *for her arrogance* – a detail that Antigone's plea for sympathy is ironically blind to.

> to liberate herself effectively from this domestic enslavement, is to *sacrifice the sacrifice itself* – to stop accepting or even actively sustaining the social network (of the family) which confers on her the role of exploited victim.[111]

"Imaginary identification" in this context is a Lacanian concept. It refers to the mental image that one has of oneself – the *ideal-ego* – that one tries to conform to with one's actions.[112] The point of this passage is that whilst the mother complains about the suffering she experiences as a result of her position in the family, it is this being-as-suffering that forms her imaginary identification. She sees herself and identifies as "one who suffers". This is not to assert the validity of a certain form of family hierarchy whereby women are subjected to and exploited by the rest of their families. The point is rather that the reason this woman is a miserable victim of her family and continues to be so despite her unhappiness is precisely because she identifies herself as a miserable victim. It is only by ceasing to identify as the victim and by taking individual positive action that she can overcome her misery. To quote the key phrase, she must "sacrifice the sacrifice itself" – in other words, she must let go of the notion that she is somehow deprived of her full experience of subjectivity as a result of her place within the social network. She must come to the realization that as long as she sees reality through the lens of victimhood the pattern is bound to repeat itself. [113] It is only once she casts this

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[111] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p.216

[112] This concept will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

[113] This could form the basis for a Lacanian critique of contemporary social justice/identity politics movements. The underlying idea is that a certain group is suffering because of its oppression by another, dominant group – usually white, male, heterosexual men. Such a reading of social relations is based upon a self-identification as a victim, linked to a certain aspect of the self – "I am oppressed because I am a woman/homosexual/black person etc." There are two problems with this. Firstly it encourages victim identity and denies personal responsibility for one's life: essentially, it says "we all suffer and it's all their fault; there's nothing we can do about it except fight them" where "them" is whatever entity seems relevant: men, the patriarchy, heterosexual norms, rich people etc. The group only has ontological security so long as the members see themselves as victims – which is why they have trouble with individuals who don't "toe the line", like women who say they don't need feminism, or workers who are quite happy to live in a capitalist society and don't see themselves as exploited by private ownership of the means of production. Secondly, it ascribes all of a person's suffering to one aspect of their person, ignoring other reasons why people might struggle in life: bad parenting, social anxieties, ignorance of social conventions, unattractiveness, substance addictions, unpleasant temperaments, low IQ, physical and mental disabilities, bad luck, etc. Indeed if someone is struggling it is often a combination effect of many extra- and intra-personal forces, and the attempt to reduce the cause of suffering to just one or a few unifying strands inherently oversimplifies the reality of the human condition. This is not to deny the struggles of life or discrimination that does exist, but to notice that building a cultural movement based on perceived innocence and collective victimhood rather than personally overcoming the obstacles to one's development, necessarily oversimplifies and groups together the individual problems that people face. In a similar vein, one might recall here Lacan's rebuke to the student protestors in 1968, "As revolutionaries, you are hysterics who demand a new master. You will get one", the point being that the revolutionary, "champion-of-the-oppressed" identity will always seek an external enemy in the form of an oppressor or master in order to give it an ontological foundation. Although the goal is ostensibly to end oppression and lift up the oppressed, as long as such a way of identifying persists individuals will continue to see social relations in terms of oppressors and victims. Thus the moment one form of oppression is overcome a new oppressor will be "found" in a cycle that exists primarily to perpetuate the perceived victimhood of its adherents.

lens off and takes responsibility for her suffering, even if she is an innocent victim of it, that she can free herself.

Žižek transplants this passage from *The Sublime Object of Ideology* into the speech of the Chorus to highlight that Antigone, like the mother, has an ego-investment in her own suffering. Her imaginary identification hinges on victimhood, and by choosing to act in a way that she knows will lead to her execution she puts herself into a position from which she can continue to identify as a victim and to protest her innocence until her dying breath. She can thus paint herself as a tragic heroine who died for an honourable cause. What Žižek via the Chorus thus suggests is that the truly noble gesture would be to "sacrifice the sacrifice itself", to act without regard for how she will be viewed by posterity. The meaning of the Chorus's final words are thus clear: it's only "when your very act of disappearing disappears that you are no longer in love with yourself, with your noble gesture, and reach true modesty". With this speech, Žižek qua the Chorus explicitly criticises Antigone's vanity and her desire to aestheticize her death. It also poses a theoretical challenge to her self-identity of victimhood.

The self-absorbed element of Antigone's personality also appears in her first confrontation with Creon. She begins by justifying her actions through reference to "the gods and their unwritten and unchanging rules."[114] A few lines later, she invokes them again, this time calling them "my immemorial laws".[115] We see a subtle difference between the two quotations from Žižek's play – the laws that Antigone initially refers to as belonging to the gods become her own, "my immemorial laws". In a passage discussed earlier we saw the Chorus rebuke Antigone for comparing herself with deities.[116] In shifting ownership of the laws from the gods to herself, Antigone once again commits this subtle blasphemy. Creon's response mocks her adherence to these laws, "I see – so they are fits of your imagination", to which she replies, "Once you believe in them, you see they are real, much more real than what you see, much more inviolable, although you cannot touch them".[117] These lines can be interpreted in at least two ways. Antigone's point is legitimate: there are rules that humans live by that are not "tangible", if "tangible" refers to the formal laws of the state, as highlighted in Creon's line: "I deal with what I see, our city, its written laws that people know and have to obey".[118] Intangible laws include religious laws; other examples might be politeness, codes

[114] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.8
[115] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.9
[116] "It's a fine thing for a woman, | once she's dead, to have it said she shared, | in life and death, the fate of demi-gods. | But you, Antigone, you're not yet dead | and while still alive, you already weave a myth |about yourself, imagining how you will look when dead." Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.12
[117] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.8
[118] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.8

of honour and personal mottos, even natural laws. Nonetheless, given Antigone's suicidal obsession with the law she follows and the narcissistic traits we have already considered, one can also follow the logic of Creon's suggestion that "your laws are fits of your imagination", that Antigone is living in a world of her own.[119]

This fixation on herself is further emphasized a number of lines later, when Antigone asks, "but where could I gain greater glory than setting my own brother in his grave?"[120] This question betrays that her motivations go far beyond the principle that Polyneices must be buried and into considerations of what she herself can gain from the act of burying him. Yet according to Žižek'a writings, it is not just glory that Antigone stands to gain from burying Polyneices. According to a passage in *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* there is a certain amount of pleasure produced in the very act of following a moral principle:

> It is a commonplace of Lacanian theory to emphasize how [the] Kantian moral imperative conceals an obscene superego injunction: "Enjoy!" – the voice of the Other impelling us to follow our duty for the sake of duty is a traumatic irruption of an appeal to impossible *jouissance,* disrupting the homeostasis of the pleasure principle and its prolongation, the reality principle… The moral Law is obscene in so far as it is its form itself which functions as a motivating force driving us to obey its command – that is, in so far as we obey moral Law because it is law and not because of a set of positive reasons: the obscenity of moral Law is the obverse of its formal character.[121]

The point of this passage is that there is a feeling of pleasure produced in obeying a moral law that has no grounds in the specific positive content of the law. The pleasure is produced in the

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[119] This point is a speculative one and I will leave the right of final judgement to the reader.

[120] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.9. This phrase features in Sophocles *Antigone* 502-504:
καίτοι πόθεν κλέος γ᾽ ἂν εὐκλεέστερον κατέσχον ἢ τὸν αὐτάδελφον ἐν τάφῳ. τιθεῖσα;
Antigone's use of the word κλέος (kleos, translated as "glory") is significant – it is the prize sought by male Greek heroes in the Homeric poems. By aiming at kleos Antigone steps out of the usual boundaries imposed on a woman's life and enters the sphere of men and heroes. This is thus an important line for studies that focus on gender dynamics in Sophocles' Antigone. (The significance is further amplified by Creon's speech prior to this line in which he shows anxiety that he will be unmanned by Antigone is she goes unpunished, lines 484-485). In Žižek's text the emphasis is on Antigone's unrelenting commitment to her principle and the glory she thinks it will give her, rather than on the gender dynamic between Creon and Antigone. Greek text from Sophocles. "Antigone" in: *Sophocles. Vol 1: Oedipus the King. Oedipus at Colonus. Antigone. With an English translation by F. Storr. The Loeb classical library*. trans: Francis Storr. London; New York. William Heinemann Ltd.; The Macmillan Company. 1912. Perseus Digital Library.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0185> Accessed 04/11/18.
For studies that explore gender dynamics in Sophocles' *Antigone,* see eg. Owoeye, Omolara. "Gender Pride as Tragic Flaw in Sophocles' Antigone". *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 2(1), 2012, pp.102-114; Sjöholm, Cecilia. *The Antigone Complex: Ethics and the Invention of Feminine Desire.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

[121] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p.81

tautological act of simply following the law on account of its formal structure – in other words, following the law *because it is the law*. Consequently, Antigone's insistence on burying Polynices because it is the right thing to do cannot help but trap her in what Žižek calls the "obscenity of moral law" – the enjoyment produced by committing herself to the principle that he must be buried and carrying it out at all costs. In light of this, consider this comment Ismene makes early in the narrative about Antigone's plan to bury Polyneices:

> Your love for your brother is so strange
> I do not recognize myself in it. There's no compassion
> in it, no warm feeling for the beloved.
> It is as if you love him to be dead,
> as if you're ready to destroy what you love.[122]

Ismene's suggestion is that there is something uncanny about her sister's motivations – "it is as if you love him to be dead". It is the death of Polyneices that allows Antigone to attach herself to the grand ethical principle that he must be buried, one which she can follow through to the end regardless of the consequences for herself. Whilst the prohibition of Polyneices' burial may be a scandalous offense, it is also an opportunity for Antigone to commit herself to a moral law and to reap the "obscene" pleasure produced in following it. A second passage from *The Sublime Object of Ideology* furthers this point we have been making:

> Of course, the elementary feature of Kant's ethics is to exclude all empirical, "pathological" contents – in other words, all objects producing pleasure (or displeasure) – as the locus of our moral activity, but what remains hidden in Kant is the way this renunciation itself produces a certain surplus enjoyment (the Lacanian *plus-de-jouir)*.[123]

The Kantian notion is that a genuinely ethical act should not be affected by thoughts of personal gain or loss. What Žižek suggests via Lacanian theory is that the renunciation of personal pleasure (or pain) is itself unavoidably a source of a particular type of pleasure – the very act of self-denial is gratifying to the individual. Consider that Antigone insists on burying her brother in spite of the consequences that she knows she will face as a result. In willingly committing an act that carries on it the price of her life, she renounces all of the pleasures (and displeasures) that the rest of her life would have brought her. Yet, according to the above passage this renouncement is unavoidably and inescapably always a source of pleasure in itself. Let us recall the passage in which the Chorus

[122] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.3
[123] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p.82; see also Žižek, S. *The Ticklish Subject* p.375

berates Antigone for her inability to "sacrifice the sacrifice" – we might now expand this idea to include sacrificing "the pleasure of the sacrifice."

These two passages quoted from *The Sublime Object of Ideology* suggest that Antigone's "grand gesture" of giving up her life for her principle is by no means a selfless sacrifice. There is something self-gratifying about the act: she experiences a certain enjoyment both in following her principle simply because it is a principle*,* and in renouncing any potential pleasures that she might have experienced in life had she decided to continue on living. In addition to the vanity and the desire to be mythologized that we have so far have traced in her characterization we may now add the fact that in resisting Creon and burying Polyneices she is granting herself an element of "obscene", self-gratifying pleasure.[124]

Let us take a moment to recall what has so far been said about Žižek's characterization of Antigone. We have seen how he paints her as vain and self-absorbed, unable to "sacrifice the sacrifice", and concerned with the aesthetic of her death. We have also explored how, according to Lacanian theory, her adherence to a moral principle is inherently a pleasurable act for her. This adds to the picture that Antigone has something to gain for herself from the death of Polyneices and that her desire to bury him is not purely altruistic. There is an element of self-indulgence in her actions, in her desire to be recognized and mythologized for following the moral principle that he must be buried.

We will now consider a third troubling aspect of her characterization. For this it is first necessary to recall the earlier discussion of the suffering mother who, like Antigone, is unable to "sacrifice the sacrifice", to break out of the victim mindset. This sacrifice allows her to perpetuate her suffering whilst demanding sympathy and veneration from others.[125] We saw earlier how the Lacanian concept of imaginary identification underlies the discussion of "sacrificing the sacrifice" and the suffering mother.[126] The mother complains about the suffering she experiences as a result of her position in the family, but it is this very suffering that forms the basis of her imaginary identification. She sees herself as "one who suffers" - that is the very positive condition of her experience of herself

[124] This Lacanian position seems to suggest that a moral act will always be to a certain degree self-satisfying. It follows that a self-aware human being must maintain an ability to see his own ego investment in the supposedly altruistic principles he holds, and an awareness of the pleasure that holding and following these principles produces. This is especially important when he is considering making grand sacrifices in the name of the principle. This ability is something which Žižek's Antigone lacks. In her own eyes she is an ethical heroine, her refusal to compromise and willingness to lay down her life indicative of something truly exceptional about her character and her love for her brother.

[125] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p.216; Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.12.

[126] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p.216

as a subject. In order to overcome her suffering, she must sacrifice this imaginary identification of being as "one who suffers".

Imaginary identification relies on the image of the *ideal-ego* – the likeable mental image of the self that the subject attempts to model its behaviour on.[127] There is a twin concept to introduce here: symbolic identification. This can be conceptualized as identification with the point from which the image of the self (the imaginary *ideal-ego*) appears likeable or desirable. [128] Consider the suffering mother. Her imaginary identification aligns with an *ideal-ego* image of herself as a victim. The symbolic identification can be conceptualized as identification with the gaze of an observer which desires her to act in a certain way. This gaze belongs to the personified form of the symbolic order, of the language, law and codes that the subject uses to interpret the world and its place in it, named by Lacan the Big Other. The imaginary identification is a response to this gaze, an attempt to become the desired object of this observer. In the case of the mother, her symbolic identification is with the gaze *which desires her to continue to be exploited by her family*.[129]

Just as the suffering mother identifies as a victim and complains incessantly of her sorry lot, Žižek's Antigone identifies as a victim of cruel circumstances and as a martyr who will sacrifice her life to defy Creon's prohibition of Polyneices' burial. This is the basis of her imaginary identification. Thus, if we search for the point from which this identification appears desirable, we find her symbolic identification. Antigone's symbolic identity is with the Big Other that desires her to suffer, to be a martyr and to die. The suffering mother's life continues to be miserable precisely because despite her complaints, she continues to sustain the identifying structures that perpetuate her victimhood. It is exactly the same for Antigone, only worse – her symbolic identification with the Big Other calls on her not only to suffer, but to die.

Antigone's problem is her inability to detach from her imaginary and symbolic identifications, from the demands of the Big Other. In a passage from *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* Žižek stresses that it is possible to detach from its demands on account of the fact that the Big Other itself is inherently incomplete and thus non-absolute:

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[127] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p.105

[128] Lacan's corresponding term for the figure of symbolic identification is the *ego-ideal.*

[129] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* pp.105-107. Žižek explains this point with an example of Chaplin films, which he claims are vicious and mocking towards children. He suggests that if the artist's image of children is as objects to be mocked (imaginary identification) rather than as objects of care and love needing protection, the place we must stand in order to see children in this way (symbolic identification) is the position of the children themselves. The big Other of these scenes is thus the mind of a child. In a similar vein he claims that the (imaginary) image of the "good, innocent, common people" comes from the (symbolic) position of the "corrupted, evil" bourgeois world of money or the Communist party leadership.

> Today it is a commonplace that the Lacanian subject is divided, crossed-out, identical to a lack in a signifying chain. However, the most radical dimension of Lacanian theory lies not in recognizing this fact but in realizing that the big Other, the symbolic Order itself, is also *barre*, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack. Without this lack in the Other, the Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject would be his radical alienation in the Other. So it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of "de-alienation" called by Lacan *separation*: not in the sense that the subject experiences that now he is separated from the object by the barrier of language, but that *the object is separated from the Other itself,* that the Other "hasn't got it", hasn't got the final answer – that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other. This lack in the Other gives the subject – so to speak – a breathing space, it enables him to avoid the total alienation in the signifier not by filling out his lack but by allowing him to identify himself, his own lack, with the lack in the Other.[130]

Essentially, then, it is the lack in the Other which grants the subject the freedom to reconstitute itself. With the awareness that whatever demands the subject feels from the Big Other are ultimately *ungrounded,* it is able to manoeuvre at a distance from the Big Other and if necessary to redefine its identity. The subject's imaginary identity is not absolute, and neither is its symbolic identification. The Big Other itself is incomplete, it "hasn't got the final answer"; recognition of this fact grants the subject an element of freedom. We may suggest that if Antigone were more self-aware (or if she bumped into a time-travelling Lacanian psychoanalyst) then she might come to perceive that the Big Other is incomplete, and consequently achieve the effect of "de-alienation" described above. She might then be able to redefine her identity away from the site of this tyrannical Big Other that compels her to view herself as a suffering victim and a martyr. Nonetheless, as it stands in Žižek's play, Antigone is dominated by her symbolic and imaginary identifications and unable to separate from them, consequently committing acts that will actively sustain her suffering and lead to her death.

This theoretical point is explored in a dialogue that occurs early in the text. Antigone and Ismene are arguing over Antigone's decision to bury Polyneices and Ismene's reluctance to assist her:

> Ismene: But I can't act
> against the state. That's not in my nature.

[130] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* p.122; for more on the Big Other as incomplete, castrated, see Žižek, S. *Disparities*. pp.289-291

Antigone: Let nature then be your excuse. Just don't forget
you chose it. My choice is different, so I'm going now
to make a burial mound for my dear brother.

Ismene (whispers to herself): You've also made a choice.
Your duty's your excuse.[131]

In this exchange the words "nature" and "duty" are key. Ismene displays the *ideal-ego* image that she aligns herself with when she claims that it is not in her nature to act against the state. Antigone points out that nature is an "excuse"; this is a choice. Yet as Ismene notes to herself, Antigone falls into the same trap in acting according to a sense of "duty". Duty refers to Antigone's idea of what she *must* do. It relates to her imaginary identification, the mental image of herself that she holds. She sees herself as one who must bury her brother; her duty is both to her brother *and* to herself, the *ideal-ego* of herself that she holds. When the sisters point out in turn that each is using the appeal to "nature" or "duty" to disguise what really is a matter of "choice", the underlying notion is that the imaginary identification, the *ideal-ego,* is not absolute, since the Big Other, the gaze for which this identification is desirable, is itself incomplete. Identification with one's nature or duty is in fact identification with a Big Other that desires commitment to nature or duty, and since the Big Other is incomplete, the act of identification is not a matter of necessity. As we have seen, the problem with Antigone is her inability to separate from her imaginary and symbolic identifications and to "sacrifice the sacrifice". This propels her towards death and suffering. Interestingly, she is able to criticize this rigid identification with the ideal-ego in her sister's behaviour, and even to claim "my choice is different", but Ismene's final whispered comment suggests that Antigone is really blind in herself to what she can perceive in others. She is absolutely committed to her duty, failing to see that the Big Other "hasn't got the final answer".

Elsewhere in the play it is suggested that Antigone's rigid and unwavering commitment to her sense of duty makes her into something cold and inhuman. We have already discussed the passage in which Ismene criticizes Antigone's love for Polyneices, stating "there's no compassion in it, no warm feeling for the beloved. It is as if you love him to be dead, as if you're ready to destroy what you love".[132] To this Antigone replies:

True love is cold, more cold than death itself.
It's not a matter of feeling which sways here and there.

[131] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.4
[132] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.3

Firm as a rock, it brushes off the sway of emotions,
easily enduring all pressure and constraint.[133]

Antigone's disturbing sentiment that "true love is cold, more cold than death itself" forms a stark contrast with the "warm feeling" of love described by Ismene. The juxtaposition makes Antigone seem icy and inhuman, even corpse-like. This is further driven home by her choice of a rock as a point of comparison. Rocks are cold, hard and unaffected by the sway of emotion. What distinguishes a human being from a rock is, above all else, the capacity to change, grow, develop, to make decisions, to feel, to effect its own manner of being. The passage quoted above suggests that Antigone rejects this humanity – she desires to be something concrete, free from the burden of change. Later in the text she compares herself to Niobe, who famously was transformed *into a rock* as punishment for her offense against Leto.[134] The desire to become like a rock manifests itself in Antigone's unwavering commitment to burying Polyneices, knowing full well it will lead to her death. With the principle adopted her life has a singular direction; she can be free of all feeling and change. She is impelled towards death, and it is in death that she will finally be able to become like a rock – cold, hard, unfeeling.[135] The metaphor of the rock occurs at another, highly emphatic point: it is the very first image of the play's very first line:

A lean rock stands proudly alone in deep grass.
But when strong man's hands raise it, worms, insects,
roaches, all the swarming and disgusting murmur of life
confronts the eye, a chaos even gods can't muster.[136]

[133] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.3
[134] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.12 "I've heard about a guest of ours, | daughter of Tantalus, from Phrygia – | […] God brings me | to a final rest that most resembles hers"
[135] It may be objected that the play's portrayal of Antigone's commitment to a principle is overtly negative. One might protest: "surely humanity would not have progressed if not for the sacrifices made by men and women in the name of principles: love for their countries and families, freedom, equality, truth etc." This is a problem that the play does not seem to answer satisfactorily. It might be worth suggesting that whilst there are occasions when sacrificing oneself for a principle to which one is absolutely committed is the right course of action, there are other instances when it is deeply morally problematic. Take, for example, the contemporary problem with Islamist terrorism. These terrorists believe deeply in a principle, wilfully laying down their lives for Jihad in a struggle against what they see as the evil, decadent West that is at war with Islam. If we are to understand this, we must try to understand the psychic mechanisms that drive subjects to desire death for a principle, martyrdom. A typical liberal Western response is to attribute these phenomena primarily to material and economic factors (social inequalities, western military interventions in the middle east, etc.). This glosses over the psychological tendencies and religious/ideological factors that drive individuals down these paths. Given his preoccupation with psychoanalysis and ideology, it is no surprise that Žižek's *Antigone* forces us to consider these issues, even if it does not give us any of the answers.
[136] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.1

The action begins with the tranquil image of the strong, proud rock standing tall, perhaps in a meadow or on a mountain side. The very next lines introduces man, creatures, chaos "all the swarming and disgusting murmur of life". This is what lies beneath the stalwart rock; this is the reality of man's life. The passage continues:

> Such is our ultimate reality. Some heroic men
> attempt to introduce harmony and order
> into this chaos, but they miserably fail, their acts
> only destabilizing further the cosmic order.[137]

The message here is clear. Life is chaos, and action too is chaotic, even when it aims at its very opposite, order. Antigone acts in a way analogous to the "heroic men" in the passage quoted above: she attempts to introduce harmony and order into the chaos of her own life by imitating a rock, aiming to be mythologized like Niobe. Using the premise of her duty to bury Polyneices, regardless of the cost, she becomes hard, unyielding and cold, driving herself towards death with her own sense of duty. In doing so she betrays the fundamental principle that chaos is "our ultimate reality", that human life resembles "worms, insects, roaches", a "chaos even gods can't muster" far more than it resembles a lean, proud rock. In Lacanian terms, the rock stands as a metaphor for Antigone's absolute subjection of herself to the demands of her symbolic identification with the Big Other. An orderly concrete principle gives her life a purpose for which she is willing to die, but it cuts her off from the ability to change, bend and compromise which forms the core of her chaotic humanity. As the events of the play transpire, Antigone's actions lead to more death and destruction for her family and the people of Thebes. Her acts ultimately "only destabilize further the cosmic order".

This destabilization is precisely what plays out in the play's second (alternative) ending. Here Žižek explores what would have happened if Creon had forgiven Antigone and had helped her, with Haemon's assistance, to give Polyneices a proper burial. In this ending a messenger arrives and announces that the Theban people went into a murderous rampage on learning of the burial, that they slaughtered Creon and Haemon and set the entire city ablaze.[138] Antigone reacts to this in disbelief:

> I just stood for justice, whatever the cost.
> How can this be wrong?[139]

[137] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.1
[138] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.22
[139] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.24

The Chorus then replies:

> If your justice wins,
> there will be no world in which its victory is to be seen.
> We see how dedicated you are to your Cause,
> ready to sacrifice everything for it. But wisdom tells us
> that, sometimes, when you forsake everything for your Cause,
> what you lose is the Cause itself, so all your sacrifices
> were in vain, for nothing. Then you end up
> not as a noble hero but as an abject
> whose place is neither with the living nor with the dead,
> but in the uncanny in-between where monsters abide
> that our mind cannot even contemplate.[140]

The Chorus stresses that unwavering commitment to her cause does not make Antigone a hero, it dehumanizes her, and highlights that in the process the cause itself is lost. Justice, "whatever the cost", it tells us, is no justice at all. It threatens to destroy everything in its path, leaving "no world in which its victory is to be seen". The Chorus suggests that sometimes what is necessary is an ability to break with the cause; without this ability, one becomes an uncanny monstrosity, an "abject", something that one's fellow humans cannot understand or empathize with, something they "cannot even contemplate". The Chorus here is reiterating the point that the Big Other is not absolute; Antigone's folly is her inability to maintain the proper distance, to achieve the "de-alienation" that allows her to maintain her free subjectivity.[141] This point is also stressed in another of the Chorus' speeches in this ending, in which it recites and comments upon the Kol Nidre, a Jewish prayer:

> All vows we are likely to make
> all oaths and pledges we are likely to take
> between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur,
> we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished
> and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established.
> Let our vows, pledges and oaths be considered
> Neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.'
>
> There's a great wisdom in these words,
> a wisdom that you ignored in your obstinacy.

[140] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.24
[141] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* p.122

A society is kept together by the bond of Word,
but the domain of logos, of what can be said,
always turns around a vortex of what cannot be said,
and this mysterious vortex is what all our endeavours
and struggles are about. Our true fidelity
is to what cannot be said, and the greatest wisdom
is to know when this very fidelity
compels us to break out word, even if this word
is the highest immemorial law. This is where
you went wrong, Antigone. In sacrificing everything
for your law, you lost this law itself.[142]

Taken before the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, the Kol Nidre is an *a priori* renunciation of all vows that the believer will take in the next year. It is important to note that it only refers to vows made by the believer to himself or herself and to God, and it does not allow him or her to break his vows to other people or legal obligations. The vows it releases believers from are ones of the form "Lord I promise that I will quit smoking this year" or "Lord if you grant me this I will pray to you twice a day every day". The point is that it is a weight on the conscience of believers to have broken a vow taken before God; the Kol Nidre allows them to entreat forgiveness from and reconciliation with God in advance for any vows they fail to maintain.[143]

From the Lacanian perspective, the Kol Nidre is a fascinating quirk of Jewish theology. God is a figure of the Big Other*:* he is the Being from which morality and the social order emanates (aligning him with the symbolic), and is also an ever-present gaze watching over the life of the believer. The Jewish Kol Nidre recognizes that the subject may make commitments to God and at the same time grants it the freedom to live at a distance from these commitments and to break them if necessary. Essentially it allows the subject to experience the "de-alienation" Žižek describes as resulting from the recognition that the Big Other is inherently incomplete.

The significance of this anachronic appearance of a Jewish prayer in *Antigone* is that its message relates to precisely what Antigone is unable to do. She will not compromise on her principle that Polyneices must be buried, a binding promise that she refuses to break. Her sense of duty overrules everything else – as she says, "I just stood for justice, whatever the cost". By having the Chorus recite the Kol Nidre, Žižek criticizes Antigone for her unbending commitment to the principle, for her

[142] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.23
[143] See <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9443-kol-nidre> accessed 26/07/17

inability to break away from her symbolic identification with the Big Other. Once again Žižek emphasizes that Antigone is problematic because she portrays herself as bound by necessity, by duty, by justice, an attachment to ideals that subsequently dehumanizes her and transforms her into an uncanny monster. The Chorus stresses that "Our true fidelity is to what cannot be said, and the greatest wisdom is to know when this very fidelity compels us to break our word, even if this word is the highest immemorial law". Behind the "word", commitments made in language and law – in the symbolic – lies "the vortex of what cannot be said", and this is ultimately where man's "true fidelity" lies. Recall the imagery from the play's opening: the "proud rock", beneath which lies "all the swarming and disgusting murmur of life", a "chaos even gods can't muster" – man's "ultimate reality".[144] The proud rock represents concrete commitments made in words, whilst the chaos represents the object of man's true fidelity, "the vortex of what cannot be said". The problem with Antigone is that she is faithful only to the "word" and the rock, not to the inexpressible chaos that sometimes "compels us to break our word, even if this word is our highest immemorial law".

We can recast this discussion in terms of what Mark De Kesel calls "totalitarian logic". De Kesel describes how, according to Žižekian theory, totalitarian ideologies function by asserting the absolute truth of a certain doctrine (Big Other), and denying the subject any existence outside of this truth.[145] In other words, totalitarian logic asserts absolutely the value of the "word" whilst denying the chaos of "that which cannot be said". It denies the incompleteness of the Big Other, consequently denying the subject the freedom to redefine itself and to achieve de-alienation.[146] In totalitarian logic, there is one truth, totally expressible in words, solid as a rock, and the subject must submit absolutely to this truth.

De Kesel describes the position of the subject under totalitarian logic:

> Totalitarian logic is blind to the fact that man strictly speaking never belongs to the truth he claims. Truth exists only insofar as it is supported or borne by man. The place where truth "occurs", where it "takes place", where it finds a "bearer" or a subject: this place is called "man".[147]

The key phrase here is that "man… never belongs to the truth he claims". Rather, truth exists "only insofar as it is supported or borne by man". In other words, truth belongs to the man who claims it. It is secondary to the subject. No claim to truth can fully encompass man. Accordingly, the

[144] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.2
[145] De Kesel, M. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act". p.314
[146] Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* p.122, see also page 42 of this thesis.
[147] De Kesel, M. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act". p.314

fundamental problem with Antigone is that her Cause becomes for her a totalitarian ideology. It exists as an external truth which denies her a subject position outside of its totalizing frame. In her will to realize and sustain her imaginary identification as a suffering victim, as a Niobe, she associates absolutely with her symbolic identification, with the desire of the Big Other, failing to grasp the crucial fact that the Big Other itself is non-whole. She loses sight of the fact that, as De Kesel puts it, "man never belongs to the truth he claims", that there is something in her that cannot be entirely assimilated into the discourse of truth that she hangs over herself – the "truth" that Polyneices *must* be buried, that it is her duty to bury him and become a martyr.[148] Her mistake is to assume that she can entirely assimilate herself into this truth – how? By being ready to sacrifice everything for it. As we saw in the discussion of rock metaphor, the rock represents her will to submit herself entirely to "truth", to her symbolic identification with the Big Other; the problem is that this can only be achieved by denying the element within her that resists assimilation into the Big Other, the very thing that makes her human.[149]

As we draw to the end of this chapter there is a passage in Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject* that now appears worth quoting in full:

> The "truth" of the pervert's claim that he is accomplishing his acts as the instrument of the Big Other is its exact opposite: he is staging the fiction of the Big Other in order to conceal the *jouissance* he derives from the destructive orgy of his acts.[150]

From all we have discussed in this chapter this passage seems an accurate description of how Žižek chooses to portray his Antigone. She appears as vain and self-absorbed, fascinated by her own prospects of being mythologized. She is unable to "sacrifice the sacrifice", to give up her victim identity and the obscene pleasure produced via her rigid commitment to the principle that Polyneices must be buried. She also attempts to align herself absolutely and uncompromisingly with the desires of the Big Other, ultimately failing to see that it is inherently incomplete and thus places no absolute demand upon her or her life. Like Žižek's pervert, Antigone attempts to act as the instrument of the Big Other, the absolute principle that Polyneices must be buried regardless of the cost. We saw that she is able to observe and criticize the very same mechanism at work in her sister: when Ismene claims she cannot break the laws of the state, as it is not in her "nature", Antigone

[148] Recall that in Lacan's reading Antigone was captivating because she stands for the signifying cut, the place where the signifier meets its bearer. Here, the problem is that totalitarian logic attempts to suture this cut, becoming the absolute signifier for the individual.
[149] De Kesel, M. "Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act". p.314; see note 60.
[150] Žižek, S. *The Ticklish Subject* p.380

coldly points out that this is a choice.[151] When it comes to herself, however, Antigone is blind; Ismene whispers "your duty's your excuse", but for Antigone, duty is absolute, and all must be sacrificed for it.[152] Antigone's attempt to resist Creon's authority lapses into totalitarian logic, making claim to an absolute discourse of truth that exists external to her. This denies her humanity, the chaos that is at the heart of being in the world, and conceals the true self-gratifying and egocentric nature of her actions.

This chapter has considered how Žižek reacts to the idea of Antigone as an ethical heroine. We have explored how he characterizes Antigone with detailed references to his philosophical writings and concepts from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Essentially Žižek's endeavour has been to distance Antigone from the picture of the altruistic, self-sacrificing heroine that is often painted of her. In the next chapter we will turn to the endings of the play, paying specific attention to the actions of the Chorus in the third ending and the narrative effect produced by the play's unusual tripartite structure. We will see how Žižek replaces Antigone with a new revolutionary agent and how he plays with our expectations of the tragic genre and of narrative itself in order to speak to us about the nature of the authentic revolutionary Act.

[151] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.4
[152] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.4

4. The Act

The Chorus as *populus ex machina*

The end of Žižek's *Antigone* is unusual. The play concludes three times, each time bringing about a different resolution to the main sequence of events. The first follows the pattern of Sophocles' *Antigone:* Antigone dies, Haemon kills himself, and Creon is left ruined and distraught, lamenting his bitter fate.[153] In the second, Creon, heeding Tiresias' advice, pardons Antigone. Antigone, Creon and Haemon then give Polyneices his burial.[154] However the population of Thebes are enraged at their leaders' blatant disregard for their own laws and burn the entire city to the ground in a fit of incendiary rage.[155] In the third and final ending, the Chorus revolts and wrests power from the ruling family in order to establish a new democratic political order. Creon is put to the sword, and as this ending draws to a close it appears that Antigone is about to share in his fate.[156] As the play ends, the Chorus invites the reader to reflect upon which was the right ending to the narrative.[157]

In a 2016 interview with Liza Thompson for *fivebooks.com* Žižek related the three endings of *Antigone* to what he defined as the contemporary world's "current predicament". He continued "we live in times of pseudo-conflicts: Brexit['s] yes or no; in Turkey, military or Erdogan; in Eastern Europe, new Baltic-Polish-Ukrainian fundamentalists or Putin; in Syria, Assad or Isis…".[158] He then compared this to the drama in *Antigone*:

> The conflict between Antigone and Creon is for me also a pseudo-conflict: the only way to resolve it is to change the terrain and introduce another dimension (the intervention of the Chorus in my version).[159]

The narrative of Žižek's *Antigone*, with its tripartite endings, portrays a conflict in which the victory of either of the parties is no real victory at all. The first ending, Creon's "victory", is haunted by the familiar bloodshed of Sophocles' *Antigone.* The second ending, Antigone's "victory", is catastrophic because of the incendiary reaction of the populace of Thebes to Creon's blatant disregard of his own laws. The third ending, in which the Chorus arises in order to establish peoples' democracy, follows the pattern described in the quote above: the terrain of the conflict is changed and another

[153] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.19-20
[154] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.22
[155] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.22
[156] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.26-31
[157] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.30-31
[158] < http://fivebooks.com/interview/slavoj-Žižek-favourite-plays/> accessed 17/07/17
[159] < http://fivebooks.com/interview/slavoj-Žižek-favourite-plays/>

dimension is introduced. Emerging at the end of the play, the Chorus offers a radical resolution to the "pseudo-conflict" of Antigone and Creon that takes up most of the narrative.

This dramatic resolution in which the Chorus rises up against the rulers is a uniquely modern twist. In classical tragedy the Chorus's role in the central action is less important than that of the main characters.[160] The Chorus range from mere observers of the action to dependents upon central characters (such as the Theban citizens in *Oedipus Tyrannos* or the sailors in *Ajax*). When the Chorus does act of its own accord its actions are predictable, as with the Erinyes in *Eumenides*, who hound Orestes, having declared this as their intention at the play's beginning, until the goddess Athena placates them.[161]

In the third ending of Žižek's *Antigone* the Chorus suddenly becomes a central agent. Whilst from the perspective of the classical tragic genre this interruption is unexpected and unusual, it nonetheless bears marked semblance to a technical device that does sometimes feature in tragedy: the *deus ex machina.* The *deus ex machina,* the "god from the machine", is a conclusion to the narrative in which a god intervenes to resolve a deadlock that mortals cannot get out of on their own.[162] In Sophocles' *Philoctetes* the *deus ex machina* takes the guise of Heracles, who appears to tell the reluctant Philoctetes to board Odysseus' ship and sail to Troy to fight. Odysseus and Neoptolemus, the two Greeks sent to find Philoctetes, are unable to convince him within the god's divine assistance. And in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy, although not suspended by a crane, the goddess Athena makes a similar divine intervention. At the play's conclusion, when Orestes is judged before the twelve judges on the Areopagus, six vote in favour of the Furies taking their revenge, six vote in favour of pardoning Orestes. The deadlock is only resolved by Athena, who releases him from his curse and grants the Furies a shrine for worship upon the hillside. Another *deus ex machina* occurs at the end of Euripides' *Orestes.* Note how Edith Hall describes this occurrence:

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[160] See Weiner, Albert. "The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus". *Theatre Journal* Vol. 32, No. 2 May, 1980, pp. 205-212

[161] Aeschylus, *Eumenides*. trans: Smyth, Herbert Weir. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1926. Perseus Digital Library.
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0006%3Acard%3D1
Accessed 04/01/18. Lines 130, 881-915

[162] Dunn, Francis M. *Tragedy's End: Closure and Innovation in Euripidean Drama.* Oxford, Oxford University Press. 1996. For a sociological and religious discussion of the *deus ex machina*, see Sourvinou-Inwood, Christine. *Tragedy and Athenian Religion.* Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2002.
Brad Levett, writing in *The Encyclopedia* of *Greek Tragedy,* describes the *deus ex machina* as a theatrical device whereby a god (or occasionally a mortal, as in Euripides' *Medea*) was lifted high above the stage by a mechanical crane. "The general impact of this dramatic effect is to emphasize the gulf between gods and humanity." *The Encyclopedia* of *Greek Tragedy*, ed: Hannah M. Roisman. Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. p.277

> The play thus offers a fantastic ideological settlement, which enforces harmony between the criminalized young royals and the Argive democracy – a political compromise which the events of the last few years at Athens had shown was, in reality, quite impossible. Real life cannot be controlled like a literary narrative. While social and factional divisions of the type that afflicted Athens in 408BC still existed, the class conflicts could never evanesce, as they do in Euripides' mythical Argos, at the wave of an omnipotent authorial wand.[163]

According to Hall, in *Orestes* the appearance of a *deus ex machina* resolves on the stage a political conflict that in real life was trapped in a deadlock. The social conflict Hall is here referring to is the revolutionary, anti-democratic activity of "clubs" (*hetairoi*) of young upper class people in Athens in the years around 408BC, which included participation in the oligarchic coup of 411.[164] She suggests that the Athenian audience knew from their own political reality that the on stage conflict between the criminalized young royals and the Argive democracy could not be easily resolved; nonetheless the appearance of the god allows for a fictional, fantasy settlement to be reached. Essentially the *deus ex machina* stitches up wounds that otherwise could not be healed.

We can see a similar trend in Charles Segal's comments on the ending of Euripides' *Electra.* Segal suggests that *Electra* features Castor in the form of the *deus ex machina,* whose appearance, although less influential on the course of events, still serves to smooth out the problematic fissures at the end:

> Castor… heals some of the emotional and moral chaos of the matricide with what is virtually a second ending, and this carefully provides for the burial [of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus].[165]

Note that Segal describes Castor's intervention as "virtually a second ending", an interesting observation given our discussion of Žižek's *Antigone* and its three endings. In Žižek's *Antigone* it is not a god but the Chorus, representing the people of Thebes, that intervenes to resolve the conflict of Antigone and Creon at the end of the narrative. A *deus* does not descent from above but rather the *populus* rises up and overthrows the ruling family, resolving the "pseudo-conflict" and promising a fairer, democratic system in its place. Perhaps we might give a name to this phenomenon – a *populus ex machina* – a humanistic variation on the classical narrative device for tying up loose ends.

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[163] Hall, Edith. *Greek Tragedy.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010. p.277
[164] Hall, E. *Greek Tragedy* p.140, p.287.
[165] Segal, Charles. "Catharsis, Audience and Closure". in: Silk, M. S. *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996. pp.149-172. p.158

Rather than relying on an external divine intervention, it is the people (as distinct from the ruling aristocrats) who undertake to resolve the conflict for themselves.[166]

It is of major significance that Žižek does not simply rewrite *Antigone*'s ending so that at the crucial moment the Chorus rise up and take control. He reaches this point only by taking us through two other possible endings to the narrative first. In the interview quoted above Žižek claims that the conflict between Antigone and Creon is only a "pseudo-conflict".[167] It is the third ending, featuring the *populus ex machina,* that introduces "another dimension" that is able to "resolve" the conflict.[168] The point is not to rewrite *Antigone* to give it a "better" ending, to stress that the Chorus should have risen up, taken control of the polity and banished the bickering royal family. For Žižek the depiction of the "pseudo-conflict" is just as important as the depiction of the "resolution". Furthermore, he stresses in the same interview that Chorus are not necessarily going to do things any better: "There is no guarantee of redemption here: redemption is merely given as possible."[169] His point must be to emphasize that the "answer", the way to resolve the situation, must come from without, from a place where no-one expects it. Žižek takes the reader through the two hollow victories of the "pseudo-conflict" before introducing the resolving agent in the third ending in order to stress this agent's externality. This also highlights the fact that the originally conflicting parties cannot resolve their conflict effectively on their own.

In this sense, the Chorus enacts an intervention of the Real, it "Acts", "it changes the very conditions of what seems to be possible".[170] Recall what was discussed at an earlier point regarding Žižek's model of the Act and its relevance for *Antigone*.[171] For the early Žižek (and other commentators) Antigone was an authentic Actor, plunging into the Real and changing the coordinates of what seemed possible.[172] But as we have seen, in the 2016 *Antigone* Žižek remodels Antigone so that she

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[166] Is the modern fantasy of the People all united in working together towards a common end another variant on the God-idea? If God as a transcendent entity is taken to be the embodiment of the highest human ideals – goodness, justice, knowledge etc., the idea of the unified People who act in the name of these ideals (as opposed to corrupt individuals who advance their own interests at the expense of others) takes the place of the God-image. On such a view, we might define totalitarian states which claim to enact the will of the People as quasi-religious organisations. Similarly, politicians who claim to speak for "the People" appear less as politicians than as priests, speaking with the knowledge of an idealized transcendent entity's will. Lacanian theory describes both the God-idea and "the People" as forms of the Big Other, but I wonder how far this structuralist view diminishes the numinous power of these phenomena.

[167] < http://fivebooks.com/interview/slavoj-Žižek-favourite-plays/>

[168] < http://fivebooks.com/interview/slavoj-Žižek-favourite-plays/>

[169] < http://fivebooks.com/interview/slavoj-Žižek-favourite-plays/>

[170] Žižek, S. Melancholy and the Act. *Critical Inquiry*, 26(4), 2000: pp.657-681 p.672. See discussion of the Act in Chapter 2.

[171] See notes 83, 86 and pages 29-30 of this thesis

[172] Žižek, S. From "passionate attachments" to dis-identification. *Umbr(a)*, 1, 1998 pp. 3–17 p.6-7. See the discussion in Chapter 2.

becomes not an actor but a “lifeless automaton”, a "rock", “cold, hard, unfeeling”, blindly devoted to enacting the will of the Big Other and sustaining her identity as a victim and a martyr.[173] In Žižek’s *Antigone* it is the Chorus who take over the agency of the authentic Act, changing the field of play and plunging into the unchartered depths of the Real. In the same interview quoted above, Žižek comments that:

> Everything rests on them, the anonymous Chorus, without any guarantee in God or any other figure of the big Other—it is up to them to act like the Holy Spirit, practicing *agape,* or political love, as Terry Eagleton proposed to translate this term.”[174]

Unlike Antigone, the Chorus have no absolute principle to guide them. They have no guarantee in any figure of the Big Other, no concrete identity with which to align themselves, they are “anonymous”, their direction is not fixed. Here it is worth recalling De Kesel’s description of the Žižekian revolutionary Act:

> Unlike totalitarian denial, the revolutionary act acknowledges contingency - and thus lack, subject and desire (and "will", to name one of Lenin's terms). An act is not truth's implementation; rather, it leaves all truth behind and delivers it to contingency, which is the only way to make it *really* happen.[175]

De Kesel stresses here that contingency is key to the revolutionary Act. In *Antigone,* it is the Chorus, not Antigone, who stand for its implementation. Antigone’s actions represent a totalitarian denial of contingency in the name of “truth” – Polyneices *must* be buried, or she *must* die. There is no room for manoeuvre. On the other hand the Chorus’ revolutionary act embraces contingency and potential. It relies on no Big Other; it has no definitive direction. As Žižek tells us, “There is no guarantee of redemption here: redemption is merely given as possible.”[176]

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[173] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.3 See the discussion in Chapter 3.

[174] < http://fivebooks.com/interview/slavoj-Žižek-favourite-plays/> There is a significant idea expressed in the notion of a transition from political life grounded in a belief in ‘God or any other figure of the Big Other’ to political life acting ‘like the Holy Spirit’, practising ‘agape, political love’. The sentiment behind this can be found in the logic of the Holy Spirit, found in John 4:12 “no one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us”. The point here is that to survive, the Theban people must transition away from life lived under the gaze of the Big Other (qua God or another ideology) and towards a new supremely materialistic form of life which construes their interrelationships with one another as the highest good. Žižek describes this act of dispensing with the Big Other in *Living in the End Times* p.134, where he interprets the motif of death of God (qua Jesus) in Christianity to mean that the Christian faith in its proper dimension recognizes that there is no external transcendental Other in which to ground one’s faith.

[175] De Kesel, M. *Act without Denial: Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act*. p.316

[176] < http://fivebooks.com/interview/slavoj-Žižek-favourite-plays/>

In *Antigone* Žižek sets out to portray Antigone as a problematic character, attached too strongly to the Big Other and the concrete image of herself that she holds.[177] The Chorus by contrast embodies the contingency necessary for the authentic revolutionary Act, away from the site of the Big Other and objective "truth". The surprising emergence of the Chorus as a radical agent in the third ending is an interruption of the Real, an event that disrupts the pattern of the narrative and indeed of tragedy in general. Crucially, it would not have been enough for Žižek to simply change the plot of *Antigone* so that it ends with the appearance of the *populus ex machina*. It is essential for the play to first work through the "pseudo-conflict" of Antigone and Creon in both its dimensions first, in order that the message of the final ending is not that the people should revolt, but that the resolution to the conflict should come from outside the system, from the point where it is least expected. This would not be clear if the full scope of the "pseudo-conflict" was not first properly expressed. Ultimately, the Chorus is the legitimate agent of the revolutionary Act because it "changes the co-ordinates of the system" and because it embraces "contingency" over the "truth" of the Big Other. The narrative ends directly after the Chorus has taken control, ensuring that contingency is eternally preserved, the question of "what comes next" being one that the reader will never find fully answered. The Act of the Chorus towers over the play, having changed the co-ordinates of the system and embraced contingency, in absolute authenticity.

Inconclusion(s)

We have traced how Žižek departs from the traditional model of tragedy in which the Chorus rarely takes a part in action, instead making the Chorus commit an authentic revolutionary Act. The play defies tragic convention, and as we shall now see, it displays the same two distinguishing features that we noted in the Act of the Chorus. The play in its very structure is set up in order to challenge our preconceptions of narrative in general and tragedy in particular. It reinterprets *Antigone* in a way that defies the traditions of the classical tragic genre, thus changing the rules of the existing system as we understand them. Furthermore, it rejects a causal model of plot and instead embraces contingency and open-endedness, just as the Chorus embraced contingency whilst Antigone's action was single minded and inflexible. Along these lines, we may make the claim that the play itself is a poetic Act.

In order to better understand this claim it will first serve our purpose to discuss the traditional model of tragedy in greater depth.[178] The eminent and (nearly) contemporary piece of scholarship on Greek

[177] See Pages 41-50 of this thesis

[178] It has been suggested that Sophocles' *Antigone* does not fit well with the Aristotelian model of tragedy. See Hester, D. A. "Sophocles the Unphilosophical: A Study in the 'Antigone'" p.12 n.1 for a survey of scholarship that addresses this problem. It is beyond my purpose to discuss this issue in further detail here. As will be seen

tragedy that has survived is Aristotle's *Poetics.* This early work of narratology gives a detailed structural account of what, in Aristotle's view, makes a good tragic play. What matters most for Aristotle is plot.[179] Plot is devoted more time than any other theme in the work. For Aristotle, what makes for a good plot are consequentiality and a sense of completeness.[180] Completeness contains the idea that the plot should have a clear "beginning", "middle" and "end" which work together to form one whole, continuous action. Consequentiality refers to the notion that the sequence of events that make up the action should take place in a logical and probable fashion. Genevieve Liveley writes:

> […] a plot should not simply arrange its incidents into a merely temporal sequential series of events, but connect them logically and causally "according to probability or necessity".
>
> It is not enough for events merely to follow each other in linear temporal (*post hoc*) sequence, but there must be a logical causal (*propter hoc*) connection between them, because (from the audience's perspective) this arrangement is more artistic, more exciting (*thaumaston*), and more affective.[181]

What makes a good plot is the sense that the events begin and end at logical points and follow one another not just out of contingent chance but because of logical necessity. As Liveley stresses, the "cognitive processing" of the audience plays an important part in Aristotle's conception of what makes a good narrative. A good plot will make the reader feel that what happened had to happen, not just because the author wrote it that way but because the details of the plot push it in that direction. Accordingly, the simple plot "A man bought a dog. The dog chewed his favourite armchair. The man sold his dog" follows Aristotle's scheme, whereas "A man bought a dog. The dog chewed his favourite armchair. The man sold his children" does not.

What we encounter in Žižek's *Antigone* is a plot far removed from Aristotle's scheme. At the end of Žižek's play there is no clear sense of "what happened". Any of the three endings "could" have taken

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shortly, I make mention of Aristotle's theories in order to give a general picture of the structure that Greek tragedies follow. This serves to make clear the contrast with the Brechtian structure that Žižek uses in his *Antigone.*

[179] Aristotle *Poetics* 1450a. See Aristotle. *Poetics* trans: Malcolm Heath. London, Penguin Classics, 1996 p.xx for a discussion of the format of the *Poetics* and the primacy that Aristotle gives to plot over other elements. Plot is discussed in greater detail in the *Poetics* than any other element of tragedy identified by Aristotle. Heath divides the work into 25 chapters, of which chapters 7-14 focus almost entirely on plot. This vastly outnumbers the number of chapters devoted to the other components: character, diction, reasoning, spectacle and lyric poetry (*Poetics* 1450a).

[180] Aristotle *Poetics* 1450b

[181] Liveley, Genevieve. *Narratology*. Forthcoming, 2018, focusing on *Poetics* 1452a.

place.[182] Furthermore, the point at which the first and second endings fork off is described with such similarity that there is no clear causal reason why one should have happened and not the other. Consider these two passages in which the Messenger is announcing what has just taken place in Antigone's tomb:

> We moved to the young girl's rocky cave,
> the hollow cavern of that bride of death.
> In the furthest corner of the tomb
> we saw Antigone hanging by the neck,
> held up in a noose – fine woven linen.
> Haemon had his arms around her waist.[183]

And:

[182] Reading this chapter, Genevieve Liveley pondered whether there may be other beginnings to *Antigone* too. A playwright could certainly explore "alternative Antigones", perhaps one where Ismene takes the place of the unburied Polyneices. In lines 904-920 of Sophocles' play Antigone claims she would only have acted the way she did for her brother. Her justification is as follows:

> A husband dead, there might have been another
> A child by another too, if I had lost the first.
> But mother and father both lost in the halls of Death,
> No *brother* could ever spring to light again.

(Emphasis added, lines 909-912, 1001-1004 in Fagles' translation.) The word Antigone uses for "brother" in the Greek text of the final line is ἀδελφός. This noun is conjugated in the masculine and obviously points to Polyneices, but it shares the same root with the Greek word for sister, ἀδελφή. The sense of the Greek is thus closer to "sibling" than to our word "brother". A strong case could be made that based on her own logic Antigone would also have buried Ismene if she were in Polyneices' position. However one could also point to Antigone's cruel treatment of Ismene in the play and suggest that she might not have been so self-sacrificing for her sister. This passage has been the subject of much debate as to its authenticity and significance within the play. See for example Murnaghan, Sheila "Antigone 904-920 and the Institution of Marriage," *American Journal of Philology* 107. 1986. pp.192-207 and Neuburg, Matt "How Like a Woman: Antigone's 'Inconsistency'," *Classical Quarterly* 40. 1990. pp.54-76. For a comprehensive biography of scholarship on lines 904-920 see Hester, D.A. "Sophocles the Unphilosophical: A Study in the "Antigone"", *Mnemosyne* Fourth Series, Vol. 24, Fasc. 1 (1971), pp.11-59 p.55-58. In *Recapturing Sophocles' Antigone* Wm. Blake Tyrell and Larry J. Bennett attempt to reconstruct the 5th Century Athenian cultural atmosphere at the time of the production of *Antigone*. They suggest that this famous passage reflects a transformation in contemporary Athenian social relations whereby "women who once mourned and prepared their dead for burial within the confines of their own houses had to submit to the new rituals of the state funeral". They conclude that this passage is symbolic, representing the women of Athens giving their blessing for men and the state to take over the role of burying the dead. Calder, Wm. Blake and Bennett, Larry J. *Recapturing Sophocles' Antigone.* Lanham; Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield, 1998. p.xiv Bonnie Honig has also explored the funeral practises in Athenian society that surround and influence the production of *Antigone.* Honig, Bonnie. "Antigone's Laments, Creon's Grief". in Chanter, T. and Kirkland, S. D. *The Returns of Antigone: Interdisciplinary Essays.* Albany, State University of New York, 2014.

[183] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.19

We moved to the young girl's rocky cave,
the hollow cavern of that bride of death.
In the furthest corner of the tomb
we saw Antigone in tears, while Haemon
had his arms around her waist.[184]

Whilst the events described in these speeches differs remarkably and inaugurate completely different conclusions to the narrative, what strikes us more than anything else is the *similarity* between the two accounts, between the imagery, the language, the actions of Haemon. The effect is that each of these outcomes seem equally as likely and plausible as the other. In one Antigone was hanged, either by herself or by Creon's guards, in the other she was not, yet neither outcome takes logical priority over the other. Antigone resembles Schrodinger's Cat, dead in her tomb at one moment, alive in the next, contingency being the only distinguishing factor.[185] The effect of this is to destabilize the reader's sense of logical progression and to completely undermine the "cause-effect" model of plot that Aristotle praises so highly in his discussion of tragedy in the *Poetics.*

In Aristotle's *post hoc ergo propter hoc* model of plot one event logically leads to the next. The result is that the place where the plot finally ends up is the place where it logically should have gone. We might say that a good Aristotelian plot is structured deterministically, since there is a hypothetical place where, based on the events and characters, the plot "should" lead to. If the plot follows Aristotle's model then the events will indeed lead to this point. By contrast, Žižek's *Antigone* absolutely rejects this deterministic structure by virtue of the fact that there are three mutually exclusive endings where the events "could have" wound up. These three endings all seem contingently possible, and none takes logical priority as the one that "actually happened".

For the idea of breaking with a traditional Aristotelian model of tragedy Žižek is at least partly indebted to the German playwright Bertold Brecht. Žižek claims in the introduction to *Antigone* that his play was inspired by Brecht's "learning plays", a sequence of plays which also feature a tripartite structure.[186] Brecht, a distinguished 20th century playwright, wrote about his artistic method at

[184] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.22
[185] For a bizarre but nonetheless intriguing discussion of the "crossover" between Lacanian theory and quantum physics see Žižek, S. *Disparities* Chapter 1. I was surprised recently to discover that as early as 1950 Carl Jung had claimed that "sooner or later nuclear physics and the psychology of the unconscious will draw closer together as both of them, independently of one another and from opposite directions, push forward into transcendental territory". Only time will tell what future attempts to synthesize the objective and subjective natures of reality shall reveal. See Jung, Carl. *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self.* trans: R.F.C. Hull. London, Routledge, 1959. p.261
[186] Žižek, S. *Antigone* xxiv

length and made clear his conscious rejection of an Aristotelian view of drama. In her article *Brecht's Criticisms of Aristotle's Aesthetics of Tragedy* Angela Curran describes how:

> Brecht attacks Aristotelian catharsis as a kind of "opium for the masses", arguing that empathizing with characters prevents viewers from reflecting critically on the social causes of human suffering.[187]

Brecht believed that if a viewer identified too strongly with point of view of the central character, he would lose "a broader viewpoint from which to analyse the social themes represented in the play."[188] This passage from his essay *Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction* makes explicit his stance (Brecht refers to his style as epic theatre, distinct from dramatic theatre):

> The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.
>
> The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art; nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.[189]

Curran elaborates, stating that dramatic theatre leads the spectator to the conclusion that the suffering being depicted on stage is universal, part of the human condition as such, and thus inescapable. Conversely epic theatre leads the spectator to conclude that the suffering is contingent and unnecessary, the product of a certain configuration of social and political conditions.[190] Brecht believed his model would force the spectators to think for themselves: "Active, independent thinking in relation to characters and events in drama was an essential goal for Brecht's plays."[191]

A second feature of Brecht's writing that consciously departed from the Aristotelian model was his rejection of the linear narrative structure. As Curran tells us:

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[187] Curran, Angela. "Brecht's Criticisms of Aristotle's Aesthetics of Tragedy". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 59, No. 2 Spring, 2001. pp. 167-184 p.167 See also Brecht's essay, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. p. 181, as well as his essay, "The Modern Theatre Is the Dramatic Theatre (Notes to the opera Aufstiegund Fall der Stadt Mahagonny)," in *Brecht on Theatre*.

[188] Curran, A. *Brecht's Criticisms of Aristotle's Aesthetics of Tragedy* p.170

[189] Brecht, Bertold. "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction". in: *Brecht on Theatre.* p. 71.

[190] Curran, A. "Brecht's Criticisms of Aristotle's Aesthetics of Tragedy" p.170

[191] Curran, A. "Brecht's Criticisms of Aristotle's Aesthetics of Tragedy" p.176

> Whilst Aristotelian drama focuses on a cause effect model that is supposed to properly elicit the cathartic effect from the audience, Brechtian drama uses formal devices – including montage and episodes – to deliberately distance the observer from the action and force him to reflect independently on the fate of the characters.[192]

Drama on Brecht's model is episodic and disjointed, consciously abandoning realism. The point is less to accurately portray events in the life of characters and more to present a spectacle that will actively inspire observers to think.

Žižek's *Antigone* is clearly inspired by Brecht's model of drama. We have already traced how Žižek portrays Antigone in a way that stops the reader from identifying with her: she is depicted as self-obsessed and self-gratifying and is repeatedly called "cold", "hard", and "unfeeling" by Ismene and the Chorus.[193] In the play's second ending Antigone gets her way and the entire city is burned to the ground, an apocalyptic vision for the outcome of the principle she attaches herself too.[194] We have also seen how Žižek rejects the "cause-effect" model of Aristotelian tragedy. Rather than giving the plot a clear logical progression he writes his play with a tripartite structure that makes its resolutions seem equally plausible and contingent. Žižek's play is thus not a mere aesthetic renovation of Sophocles' play but a radical Brechtian reinvention of it that challenges how we think about Antigone and the way in which the events of her life transpire.[195] As we saw in the passages examined above, the point of Brecht's method was to force the spectator to reflect on the events and characters depicted in the play. That this desire to probe audience reflection is also at the heart of Žižek's *Antigone* is proven by the play's final lines. The Chorus, reciting its final stanza, invites the reader to reflect: "We've reached the end of Antigone's sad stories | which of them is the one to follow?"[196] It continues a few lines later "it's up to you to choose at your own risk and peril. |There is no one to help you here, you are alone."[197]

Before we conclude, there is one final point to make about the play's tripartite structure. Such a device breaks not only with the traditions of tragedy, but with the way in which the laws of narrative operate in general. Apart from the Aristotelian cause-effect model, there is a broader sense in which almost all narratives are governed by deterministic laws, taking place according to an abstract sense of necessity. This is because once the work is written, the words are on the pages and the entire plot "exists". Whilst a reader may not know what is going to happen, she has no real influence over the

[192] Curran, A. "Brecht's Criticisms of Aristotle's Aesthetics of Tragedy" p.177
[193] Chapter 3
[194] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.22-24
[195] Žižek himself likens his *Antigone* to works of Brecht in the introduction. Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.xxiv
[196] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.30
[197] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.31

characters and the events; whatever the author has written, *will happen*. Characters within the narrative act and think as if they have control over their actions, but ultimately as the products of the author's imagination their lives are controlled by the flow of writing on the page, not by acts of their imaginary wills. Most stories are fundamentally teleological, with all action necessarily leading to a structural end point, the final scene or page.[198]

Against this rule, Žižek's *Antigone* does not have a definitive ending. In the play's closing moments the Chorus invites the reader to reflect upon which was the correct way for events to pan out.[199] Was Antigone's punishment for breaking Creon's law necessary and proper? Was it right for Creon to help her bury Polyneices, even though the consequences of breaking his own law were dire? Or, ultimately, was neither right, and was the only way to resolve the deadlock for the Chorus to step in and overthrow the ruling class?[200] The question stands open and fundamentally unresolved. The play, with its radically acting Chorus and its Brechtian model of drama, breaks not only with a traditional model of tragedy, but also with a traditional understanding of narrative, in which events do not fork off, in which the final resolution to the action can conclusively be defined as "the ending".

Yet have I not contradicted my discussion in the previous section, which was based on Žižek's comment that the first two endings display a pseudo-conflict and that it is only with the radical Act of the Chorus that the deadlock is resolved? Surely this point seems to suggest that the third ending is indeed "correct", as opposed to the other two endings which are only unsatisfactory solutions to the pseudo-conflict? In order to unpick this knot, I will have to reiterate a point I made earlier. Žižek's point is not to rewrite *Antigone* to give it a "better" ending, to stress that the Chorus should have risen up, taken control of the polity and banished the bickering royal family. The point is rather to emphasize that the "answer", the way to resolve the situation, must come from without, from the place where no-one expects it, away from the site of the pseudo-conflict of Creon and Antigone. Žižek stresses the Chorus may not in fact do any better than their old rulers, but they do have a chance. To this I would now add that the first and second endings serve to emphasize the non-determinacy of action, a reminder that the intervention from without, the Act of the Chorus, is not something that can be counted on happening. Ultimately, the third ending has the potential to be

[198] Undeniably sequels and even readers' imaginations can extend a narrative beyond this point, however in the context of a single text it makes sense to consider the ending as the point at which the author's writing stops.
[199] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.30-31
[200] Žižek, S. *Antigone* p.30-31

the “right” ending, but it also has the potential to be as bad as the others, and, Žižek emphasizes, it is certainly not the necessary ending.

Conclusion

Žižek's *Antigone* is a play concerned with the performance of the Act. The narrative is set up to contrast Antigone's rebellion against Creon with the Chorus' revolutionary uprising, implicitly challenging the idea that Antigone is an emblem for those involved in progressive struggle. In the play the Chorus is the authentic "subject of the Act", whilst Antigone is only a pawn of the Big Other, overly concerned with the aesthetics of her death, and lapsing into totalitarian thinking. Žižek thus distinguishes his attitude towards Antigone from that of other modern thinkers who have written about Antigone, including Chanter and Butler. These thinkers find in Antigone an admirable, altruistic, politically motivated heroine. Nonetheless, as I have shown, several flaws can be found in their arguments.

In writing *Antigone,* Žižek's breaks away Sophocles' *Antigone* and his previous thought regarding the eponymous heroine. In former times he considered her an authentic Actor, but in the 2016 *Antigone* in attempting to resist Creon she is portrayed as a problem and a failure. His view of the heroine seems to align with Lacan's: "the day when the martyrs are victorious will be the day of universal conflagration."[201] After Antigone and Creon fail to resolve their conflict in the first two endings to the narrative, with each resulting only in chaos and bloodshed, the Chorus emerges in the third ending as the authentic revolutionary Actor: it appears from where it is least expected and gives no hints that it is concerned with how its Act appears from the outside.

The play's three endings are set up in order to highlight that the resolution to the conflict of Antigone and Creon must come from without, as an interjection that changes the very coordinates of the play itself. The Chorus is the authentic revolutionary agency behind this interjection, the *populus ex machina* that commits the authentic Act. But it is not the only entity that Acts. The play itself appears is a poetic Act. Its tripartite, Brechtian structure defies the conventions of tragedy and narrative, casting aside any sense of determinacy or teleology in favour of radical unsettled contingency. Just as the authentic Act cannot be grounded in any figure of the Big Other nor make any claim to objective truth, *Antigone* has no definitive conclusion to its events. Its three endings stand distinct and apart, open to the judgement of the reader. [202] Žižek himself suggests that the

[201] Lacan, Jacques. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. p.329

[202] Calum Neill suggests that the ethical value of Sophocles' *Antigone* lies precisely in the fact that it does not give a definitive answer: it forces the viewer to reach his own conclusion. According to Neill, an ethical choice can never be one that is given to us by the pre-existing symbolic, it always must be made by an individual himself: "the law may be on the side of the Other, the ethical always lies uniquely with the subject". With its three endings, Žižek's *Antigone* also leaves the ultimate ethical choice up to the reader. Neill, Calum. "One Amongst Many: The Ethical Significance of *Antigone* and the Films of Lars Von Trier". In: Wilmer, S. E,

third ending *may* be the correct way out – but even this is uncertain, and we are given no hints as to what happens the day after the revolutionary Chorus takes control of the city of Thebes. The play Acts – it changes the rules of tragedy and narrative and embraces contingency and uncertainty, ending with the Chorus inviting the audience to contemplate what it has just witnessed.[203]

Žižek claims in his introduction that the play "doesn't pretend to be a work of art but an ethico-political exercise".[204] Along such lines, his *Antigone* appears as something somewhere between a play and an interrogation. Following the model of Brechtian drama it forces the audience to question its preconceptions about Antigone, about tragedy, narrative, politics and revolution. Is there an answer? No – but that may be precisely the point. Žižek doesn't want to give us the answer. He wants to inspire authentic Actors, subjects who know that in an Act there can be no objective claim to truth, no Big Other to lean upon, Actors who see that there is only ever the subject and its Act, who embrace contingency and sail out into the unknown, lacking any legitimization in the forms of "right", "justice", "truth" or other lofty ideals. This uncertain message is the ultimate lesson of Žižek's *Antigone.*[205]

Zukauskaite, Audrone, et al. *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010. p.136

[203] Žižek, S. Antigone 30-31. A brief description of the paratext of the current (2016) edition of Žižek's *Antigone* is worth including at this point. The idea of radically reconfiguring Sophocles' play is repeated a number of times, almost ad nauseam. Excerpts include: "the audacity to throw fidelity to the wind", "re-write one of the most classic plays in the history of theatre", "lack of fidelity", "calling into question our ideas of reverence to the canon, fidelity to the text, and the notion of what "faithfulness" might really mean". Before we get anywhere near the text itself we are bombarded with the idea that *Antigone* breaks radically with tradition.

[204] Žižek, S. *Antigone* xxv

[205] Having concluded I must add a few final reflections upon the revolutionary significance of Žižek's *Antigone*. As we have seen, the main difference between the authentic Act of the Chorus and the inauthentic, problematic actions of Antigone relate to their relation to the Big Other. Žižek makes Antigone seem overly concerned with her principle and how she will be viewed in light of the outcome of her actions. By contrast, the Act of the Chorus appears "from without", it "just happens", with no regard for how it appears to the observer. It is not clear to me that the authentic Act can ever truly take place in anything other than fantasy. I recall here Marc De Kesel's criticism of Žižek's notion of the Act, the notion of "totalitarian denial". De Kesel argues that the moment one attempts to perform an Act that violently leaves behind the symbolic, one simply becomes the instrument of (another) Other, the pawn of an external but still concretely existing law. The democratic principles of the revolutionary Chorus seem to take this place of this Other, the principles in the name of which all actions are justified. I thus wonder if the Chorus is really any different than Antigone. As a result of the dramatic form Žižek can make the Act of the Chorus "just happen" with no warning; he can also end the play precisely at this moment in order to prevent the Act from being fully integrated into a new symbolic system of meaning. How this would transpose onto a revolutionary Act in real life is however unclear. Žižek's work says little about what the world post authentic Act would look like, or even about revolutionary organization in preparation for the Act. His efforts are devoted primarily to criticizing the current system and theorizing a revolutionary event that will "just appear" as if by an act of God – or a *populus ex machina. T*his vagueness, bordering on theology, is what leads me to find his notion of revolution ultimately unsatisfying.

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